Designing Websites to Maximize Press Relations

Guidelines from Usability Studies with Journalists
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March 2001

NN/g

Nielsen Norman Group

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Executive Summary

Journalists often work under tight deadlines.

This statement may not seem like a brilliant new insight, but it leads directly to many of our guidelines for how to design corporate websites that are both usable for journalists and deliver the desired public relations impact. Most of the PR sections of sites we have studied fail to support journalists in their quest for facts, information, and points of contact that they can use when they write stories about companies or their products.

Websites need to make it painfully obvious what the company does and what their product is. Websites for high-tech start-ups are notorious for presenting generic, buzzword-filled mission statements that could apply equally well to both their worst competitors and companies producing completely different products.

Websites must provide fast access to basic facts and figures, as well as a simple way to contact a live human being in the PR department. Journalists don't have time to wade through deep, complex navigation trees or sift factual wheat from marketing chaff. In particular, pages need to present information in well-organized chunks that are easy to scan. Distracting animations and irrelevant stock photography of smiling people do not help journalists who are in a hurry to find facts.

If journalists cannot find what they are looking for on a website, it could impact whether they include information about that company in the story. Journalists repeatedly said that poor website usability could reduce or completely eliminate their press coverage of that company. For example, after having a difficult time using a site, one journalist said:

> "… I would be reluctant to go back to the site. If I had a choice to write about something else, then I would write about something else."

Another journalist described what he'd do when he could not find a press contact, or any of the facts he needed for his story:

> "Better not to write it than to get it wrong. I might avoid the subject altogether."

Many journalists are freelancers or work from home, typically using slow dial-up connections. Many have old computer equipment and do not feel an obsessive need to download all the latest software. Thus, non-standard data formats like PDF, Flash, and Shockwave tend to clog their limited Internet connections and sometimes even crash their computers. It is wise to ensure that all your Web pages work on low-end home computers running several years' old software. We recommend that sites present all press information as simple, standard HTML, designed for minimal download times.

JOURNALISTS' INFORMATION NEEDS

The Web has arrived as a basic research tool for journalists. When asked how they would get basic information about a company, all the journalists in our study said that they would begin by doing some Web research. About half the journalists started by visiting the target company's website; the other half started by searching

an outside service (mainly Google, but also traditional services like Dow Jones Interactive and Lexis-Nexis). This finding emphasizes the necessity for having a clean corporate website with a clearly labeled *Press* or *PR* section that can quickly provide answers to journalists. It also emphasizes the need to be well represented in external search services and databases.

Journalists are not gullible, and they do not take a company's own word as truth. On the contrary, they almost all stressed that press releases are useful only to find out how a company is trying to position itself. We strongly recommend that a company's PR area have links to external sources, including press coverage, since articles from independent newspapers and magazines are often considered to be much more credible than the company's own press releases. We have seen similar findings in studies of prospective customers evaluating products on consumer- and business-oriented sites, so links to external press coverage will also help promote sales.

The top-five reasons journalists gave for visiting a company's website are:

- Find a PR contact (name and telephone number)
- Check basic facts about the company (spelling of an executive's name, his/her age, headquarters location, etc.)
- Discover the company's own spin on events
- Check financial information
- Download images to use as illustrations in stories

This basic information must be easy to find and should be cleansed of the marketese and excessive verbiage that smother the facts on many sites.

SUCCESS RATE: 60%
In our usability study, 20 journalists attempted to use the press areas of 10 corporate websites to gather information for hypothetical story assignments. Among other tasks, the journalists tried to find basic information about each company's financials, management, commitment to social responsibility, and PR telephone number.

On average, journalists found the answer to each one of these simple questions 60% of the time.

In some ways, a 60% task success rate is a reasonably good outcome for a Web usability study. In a recent study of 20 B2C e-commerce sites, we measured an average success rate of 56% for shopping tasks; success rates below 50% are the norm in many Web usability studies.[1]

There are two reasons that this study had a slightly higher success rate than other studies:

- Our test users were professional journalists; in other words, they are people who are highly skilled at ferreting out information. Our test users also had more Internet experience than most Web users.

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[1] *Design Guidelines for E-Commerce User Experience,* Nielsen Norman Group, 2001. See: http://www.nngroup.com/reports/ecommerce

- The information-finding tasks were very focused and could often be answered by finding a single piece of information on the site. Broader questions like *"Which product should I buy?"* are typically more difficult to answer.

A website success rate of 60% implies the site has a failure rate of 40%, which is considered an unacceptably low quality level for more traditional products. It is astounding that we have become so accustomed to seeing difficult websites that we can consider a 40% failure rate a reasonably positive outcome when it comes to usability.

To look at our results in another way, leaving 40% of press inquiries unanswered would be considered a very poor performance for most traditional PR departments. Even worse, our study revealed the lowest success rate for the most critical of all the tasks: finding the telephone number of a PR contact. Our test users only found a PR telephone number 55% of the time. Although a website can answer many basic questions and provide great help to journalists, they still almost always want to talk to a person.

Here are two quotes from journalists who had a particularly difficult time trying to find a PR contact and financial information:

> *"I'm sure I saw an* <u>e-mail us</u>, *but I forget where it was. I never know if someone is reading the e-mail. It's not uncommon for me to have a deadline today, and I wouldn't use e-mail if I needed it today. I would go without a quote from Merck."*

> *"My momentary frustration, I like to think it will not spill over into my story. But it makes me wonder about the competence of the people in the company. You know journalists use the site. Makes me think someone is being evasive, or that they are incompetent."*

The ability to find information on a PR site has a strong impact on the journalists' impression of the site and thus on the way they perceive the company. Sites where users have a high success rate are rated highly, and sites where they have a lower success rate are rated much lower, as shown in the diagram on page 12. The correlation between the success rate and subjective satisfaction is $r=.74$, which is a very strong outcome for a human factors experiment. Of course, other factors had an impact on the journalists' impressions as well. Their ability to find answers to their questions explains 55% of the variation in the satisfaction ratings ($R^2=.55$).

INTERNATIONAL USABILITY

The network economy is global. All companies, except maybe the corner grocery store, need an international business strategy for their websites. This is true for a site's e-commerce offers, for customer service, for content strategy, and it's true for PR. Don't ignore international PR because you assume your overseas agencies are handling it. Even if they do a good job, your corporate website still plays a role in international PR since journalists from all countries are likely to visit the site.

Usability for domestic users was poor, but it was miserable for overseas users. Among our test users, we included journalists from both the United States and Europe, and we included both U.S. and European companies among the tested sites.

Usability dropped dramatically whenever a test had an international component, such as testing a European company with U.S. journalists or a U.S. company with European journalists.

We have seen similar findings in much of our other usability research. International usability is sorely neglected on the Web today. This is true despite the fact that it's called the *World*-Wide Web and the even more important fact that any website will attract international users the moment it is placed on the Internet.

Providing a perfect site for international users can be difficult, but the most basic guidelines for international usability are reasonably simple.[2] For example, we had cases where journalists thought that a list of press releases contained nothing but old news because of a violation of one of the most basic internationalization guidelines: Use proper date formats. When the top press release on a site was dated 10-03-2000, a European user naturally assumed that it had been released on the 10th of March and concluded that the site was stale. This test session was conducted in late 2000, and the press release was in fact dated October 3rd; something that would have been communicated better by spelling out the name of the month in the date.

DESIGN GUIDELINES
This report contains 32 design guidelines that, if followed, will improve the usability of a corporate website's PR area. Most of these guidelines may seem fairly obvious. Since the usability field aims to make user interfaces simple and easy to understand, our design guidelines are almost always grounded in common sense. In the world of Web design, however, common sense is not nearly common enough. For example, the 10 sites we studied comply with only 63% of our advice about how to present press releases online.

To improve the usability of your website PR efforts, we recommend the following process.

First, conduct an internal audit. Take a hard look at your site relative to the 32 design guidelines in this report. Count how many guidelines you systematically follow, how many you systematically violate, and how many you follow only sporadically. Assign fractional credit for partial compliance, using a rough estimate of how frequently a given guideline is followed or violated. Average your score across all the guidelines. Ideally, you should have more than 90% compliance. If your score is less than 75%, your PR area probably has severe usability problems and is far from fulfilling its potential. If your score is lower than 50%, you probably need an urgent redesign.

Second, take one more hard look at your online PR information and determine how well it supports the journalists' tasks and preferences described in this report. If somebody arrives at your homepage under extreme deadline pressure, will he or she get what they need? Impress on all your writers, designers, and other PR site staff how important it is to deliver concise answers to users' questions.

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[2] *International Users: Design Guidelines for E-Commerce User Experience*, Nielsen Norman Group, 2001. See: http://www.NNgroup.com/reports/ecommerce/international.html

Third, consider conducting your own usability testing, using methods similar to those described at the end of this report. Ask reporters who cover your industry to test your site. This is guaranteed to reveal numerous opportunities for usability improvement.

We tested the PR sections of 10 corporate websites, including major multi-national companies, high-tech start-ups, and a government agency. Every site had significant usability problems. At some point in every single test session, journalists said that they would have to leave the site because it failed to deliver what they needed. Don't bet on your site being the first exception to this finding. Instead, use this report to help discover the usability issues with your site, and fix them.

STUDY OVERVIEW

The purpose of our research project was to learn which website designs are easy or difficult for journalists to use and why. We studied how journalists find information on the Web, and what impact site usability has on them.

Twenty journalists participated in this study, 15 based in New York City, USA, and five in Copenhagen, Denmark. Participants were given tasks to perform and were asked to think out loud as they worked.

We studied websites from 10 companies of varied sizes and from different industries. They include:

BMW, www.bmw.com
Fidelity Investments, www.fidelity.com
Merck (large pharmaceutical), www.merck.com,
Nokia, www.nokia.com
Philip Morris, www.philipmorris.com
SeeItFirst (interactive streaming media solutions and services), www.seeitfirst.com
Tellme (interactive voice portal), www.tellme.com
United Colors of Benetton (retail clothing), www.benetton.com
United States Patent Office, www.uspto.gov
Wal-Mart Stores, Inc., www.walmart.com

For more thorough information about methodology, users, and site selection, refer to the following sections of this report: *About the Sites Studied, Participants,* and *Methodology.*

By the time you read this, several of the websites will have updated their design. This is fine. In fact, we hope that all of the sites will remove all of the usability problems we found. The screenshots in the report and our comments refer to the designs that were in place during our user tests. The lessons learned are still valid and are still useful for other sites, even after the site where we observed a mistake has stopped making that mistake.

Current State Of Affairs

It is important that journalists be able to easily navigate your company website and find the content they need. In doing this study we learned how and why journalists use the Web, where current website design fails them, and how you can leverage your website's PR section to better serve the press and your company.

In general, the missing ingredient on most of the websites we studied is a basic PR strategy for influencing journalists' perception. Site designers do not seem to have thoroughly planned and considered how the press will use and perceive the site. In fact, sometimes the only PR presence at all is a list of press releases that were created for print or e-mailings. From all appearances, PR people were not very involved in designing the target sites, aside from providing the press releases themselves. Worse, some sites actually removed important information from the releases, such as date and contacts. Just as you should not take a printed book and present it online as is, placement and content of press information and releases on the Web should not be haphazard. You need a strategy.

Some of the sites have specific press sections. However, the mere presence of this section does not mean it helped people. Some of these sections are basically the online equivalent of a completely unreceptive PR department, or no PR department at all. If these studies were real scenarios (and journalists said they easily could have been), some companies would have lost the opportunity to help set press coverage in publications that reach up to two million readers. The reason? Poor design and lack of information prevented journalists from retrieving the information they needed. Any good Web designer or PR practitioner wants to avoid this experience. The guidelines in this report can help you avoid such lost opportunities on your own site.

SITE DESIGN CAN IMPACT PRESS COVERAGE

If journalists cannot find what they are looking for on a website, they may exclude or limit information about that company in the story. According to our users, some test sites were so unusable that the journalists would have given the companies little or no press coverage. After having a difficult time using a site, one journalist said:

> *"This would definitely have an impact. I would have to expect more time, and build in my deadline more time to deal with this, so I would be reluctant to go back to the site. If I had a choice to write about something else, then I would write about something else."*

These are two quotes from journalists who had a particularly difficult time trying to find a PR contact and financial information:

> *"I'm sure I saw an* <u>e-mail us</u>, *but I forget where it was. I never know if someone is reading the e-mail. It's not uncommon for me to have a deadline today, and I wouldn't use e-mail if I needed it today. I would go without a quote from Merck."*

> *"My momentary frustration, I like to think it will not spill over into my story. But it makes me wonder about the competence of the people in the company. You know journalists use the site. Makes me think someone is being evasive, or that they are incompetent."*

Finally, a journalist described what he'd do when he could not find a press contact or any of the facts he needed for his story:

> *"Better not to write it than to get it wrong. I might avoid the subject altogether."*

USER SUCCESS

We studied how successful journalists were at using the selected websites. We measured this based on the tasks we gave them, as well as their feedback about what information is important to them. They clearly noted four pieces of information as generally important to them in writing stories:

- Information about last year's earnings, income, or other basic financial information. For new companies without this information, we asked people to find out about either the last round of funding or other earnings information.

- Information about social responsibility, philanthropy, or other goodwill.

- Names of and information about high-level managers.

- A telephone number for a press or PR contact.

We scored the success of the sites' design based on how thoroughly journalists completed the tasks. If they fully completed it, we gave the site design a score of 100 percent. If they partially completed the task, the score assigned is 50 percent. If they found no relevant information at all, the score assigned is zero.
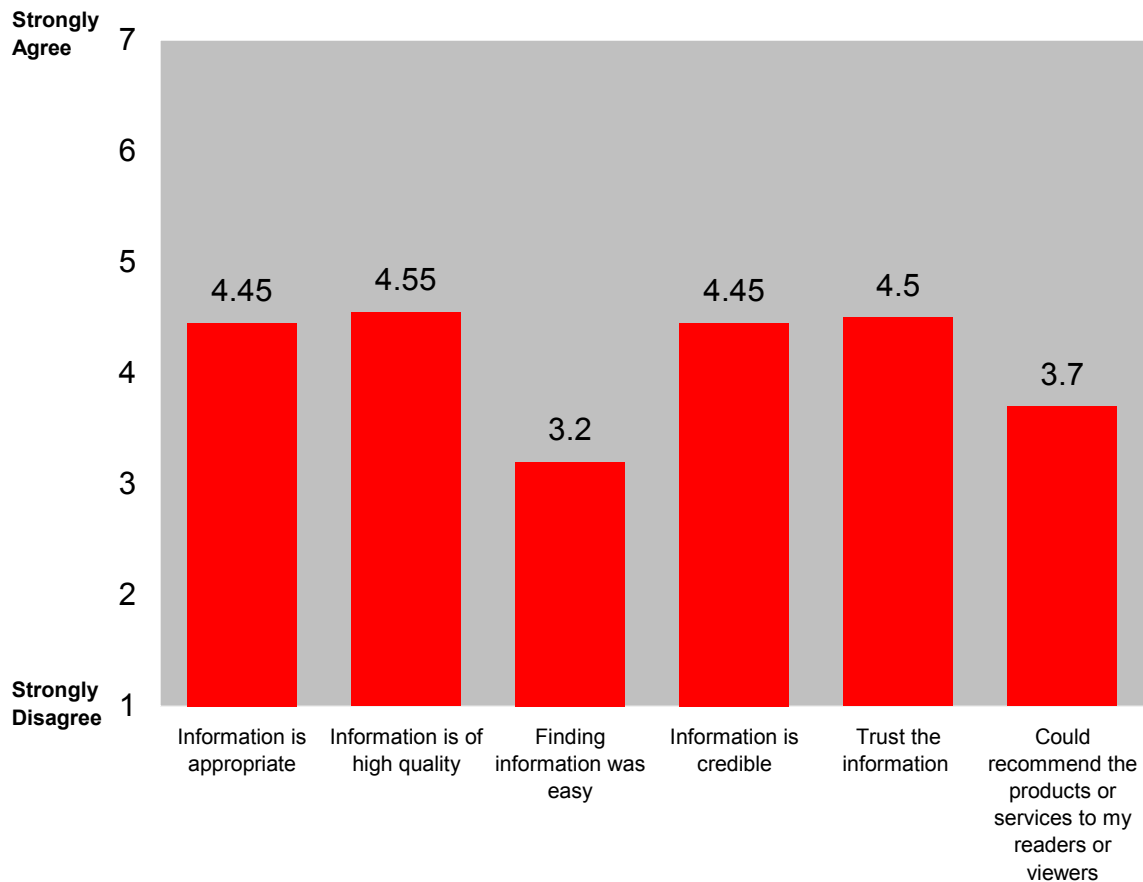
As the graph below shows, these sites did not help journalists successfully complete these very basic tasks. The success average across all four tasks was 60 percent. If these sites were being graded in a U.S. school, the average would be no higher than a D. More disturbing still is that the task that journalists were least successful at is the one they cite as the most important reason that they use a company's website: to find a press contact and telephone number.

Average Successfulness Across Sites, By Task
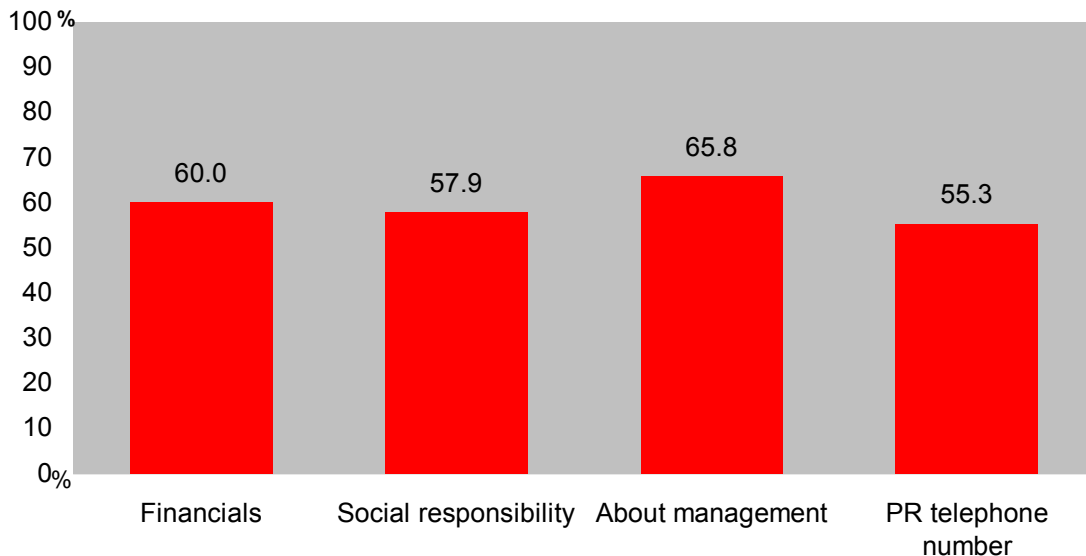
USERS' RATINGS OF THE WEBSITES

After the sessions, we asked participants to complete a written questionnaire, rating the site they tested in various areas on a one to seven scale, with seven being *strongly agree,* and one being *strongly disagree.* The graph below indicates that journalists assigned the worst ratings to 1) finding information/general usability, and 2) being able to recommend products or services based on the site experience. The latter is no surprise, as any good journalist would have to use the product more and investigate it with third-party evaluators before they could recommend it to readers. The first issue, however, is more strongly correlated to the website's usability and interface design. The qualitative findings noted in this report comply with the users' quantitative ratings in the graph below. Also, even though four is the mathematical mid-point of the rating scale, users tend to be polite in their use of rating scales. Across numerous user satisfaction surveys we analyzed, the average rating given to user interfaces was one unit better than the mathematical midpoint. Thus, the true neutral point is five on a 1 to 7 scale where 7 is best. Bearing this in mind, in this study, all of the user ratings are worse than the average rating of the average user interface.

Chart axis labels:
- Strongly Agree = 7
- Strongly Disagree = 1

Category	Rating
Information is appropriate	4.45
Information is of high quality	4.55
Finding information was easy	3.2
Information is credible	4.45
Trust the information	4.5
Could recommend the products or services to my readers or viewers	3.7

CORRELATION BETWEEN SUCCESS AND USER RATINGS

Frequently, there is a connection between how successful a user is with a product and how positively they perceive that product. It's no surprise that people generally prefer products they are successful with to those they are not.

The graph below indicates a strong correlation between the average success rate and the user ratings. Note the correlation line: it has an R-squared of 0.55, which is fairly high; in other words, the variability in the success rate explains 55% of the variability in the user preference rating. This strong correlation is true for most sites studied. The exceptions to this are tellme.com, where users rated the site less positively than their actual success should warrant; and seeitfirst.com and bmw.com, where they rated the sites more positively than their actual success should warrant.

Correlation: Successfulness & User Ratings
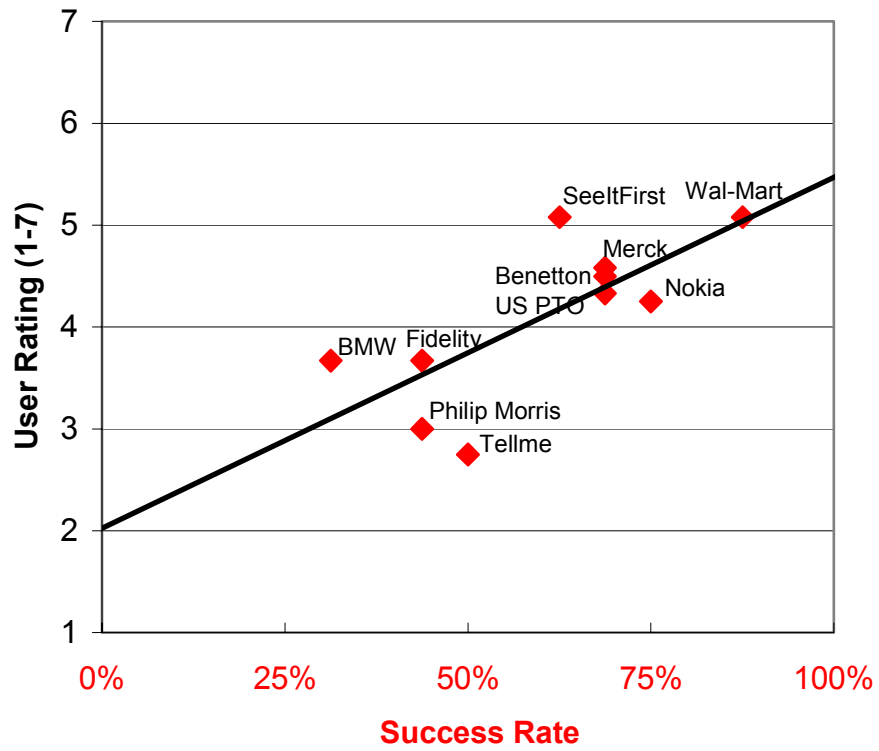
Design Guidelines

The following list comprises some simple, actionable recommendations for improving the PR of your website and making it easier for journalists to use. For a discussion of the reasoning behind these guidelines, please refer to the referenced pages.

PRESS CONTACT INFORMATION

*Discussion begins on **page 26**.*

1. In all press releases (new or archived), provide a contact name, telephone number, address, and e-mail address. If you fear that this information will become stale because your company can't do proper updates, consider providing an obvious link in the press release to one contact information page that you update regularly.

2. Provide a PR contact name, telephone number, address, and e-mail address in a press section of the website. Make sure the e-mail address is the person's name, not a generic one such as publicaffairs@thecompany.com. Similarly, make sure there is a contact telephone number for typical users or customers to call. Journalists called whatever number they could find in lieu of a missing PR number. Other users will probably be just as creative or desperate and will call a PR contact if they cannot find the support number.

3. If you can predict it, tell journalists when they can expect a response to an e-mail they send to the PR department. The top reasons journalists would not send a question to an e-mail address was that they did not know who the question would go to, and they did not know when or whether they might receive a response. By thoroughly addressing these concerns, you can keep call volume to your PR department down.

4. Do not force journalists to register in order to contact your company's press office or to read press information. In fact, do not force them to register for any reason. They don't want to.

5. Consider providing a local telephone number for different countries. Think about international users and how they might contact you. In our study, Danish journalists hesitated before calling a phone number in the U.S., and U.S. journalists hesitated before calling numbers in Germany or Italy.

PRESS RELEASES AND NEWS

*Discussion begins on **page 33**.*

6. Provide an area on the site called either: Press, Public Relations, or Press Room. Journalists expect to find media information in one place.

7. Provide links to news articles about your company. Give a short description, the date it was published, and the publication name. Don't paste the article on your site; linking to the actual publication gives you more credibility.

8. Make it possible and simple to search press releases and archived press releases only, independent of the rest of the site.

9. Design press releases for the Web. There are specific components and formatting guidelines that press releases are supposed to follow. While

these are reasonable and effective for print releases, this traditional formatting can be improved for Web presentation. The table below summarizes some recommendations for adapting press releases to the Web.

	TRADITIONAL FORMAT FOR PRINT PRESS RELEASES	RECOMMENDED FORMAT FOR WEB PRESS RELEASES
Length	No longer than two 8 1/2x11 pages.	For online reading, no longer than two pages (scrolling two pages).
Text	Double-spaced text.	For easy skimming, add several headings and bold text to call out the main points.
Typeface	Use a common serif font, such as Times New Roman.	Use a common sans-serif font, such as Arial.
At the top of the first page	In all capital letters and underlined: *For Immediate Release.*	Date of release.
At the top of each page-- On the Web, at the top and bottom of the page	Contact name Mailing address Telephone number FAX number	Contact name Personal e-mail address (not generic one) as a link Telephone number International contact names, addresses, telephone, and FAX numbers
	Page number (in case the pages get separated)	-
At the end	*End* or *–30-* to indicate the end of the release	Link to the list of releases Links to related releases or news items Link to the homepage A print button that produces a legible, attractive, fast-printing page.

CONTENT, WRITING STYLE, AND FACTS

Discussion begins on **page 45***.*

10. Provide facts; do not inundate people with marketing information. Journalists said they are mostly interested in facts and will use them in a story. They are always wary of (and sometimes cynical about) marketing information.

11. Be wary of including information about issues, politics, or generic headline news unrelated to your company. It adds to the site's complexity and detracts from your company's own message and news.

12. Get opinions from skilled PR practitioners about how information is presented on the company website.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE COMPANY, PRODUCTS, AND MANAGEMENT

Discussion begins on **page 55***.*

13. Provide information about your company and its flagship product(s) or service(s) on the homepage, or via a very obvious link on the homepage.

Make it possible for people to tell exactly what you do within the first few seconds. Give them the basic idea so they can determine why your company is different and important.

14. Provide information about upcoming products or projects. For example, if you are a TV station, give information about an upcoming made-for-TV movie. If you are a fashion design company, explain when the next season's line is expected to debut, and possibly give some pictures and brief summary of what's to come. If the information is classified, at least tell people when they can expect the information, and provide a contact name they can call for more information now.

15. Provide pictures and short bios about the company's high-level managers. Include their ages, hometown, education, and of course, correct name spelling. Put these together in the *Press* or *About the Company* area. Do not expect people to find them if they are peppered around the site or in the annual report.

16. If appearing to be an international company is important to your strategy, make sure to include information about high-level managers and offices in other countries.

PHILANTHROPY AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

*Discussion begins on **page 60**.*

17. Provide information about the company's socially responsible and philanthropic efforts, and make it easy to find. If such efforts are impressive, it can swing a reader to view your company more favorably.

ORGANIZATION AND STYLE: SITE AND PAGES ON THE SITE

*Discussion begins on **page 62**.*

18. Keep a consistent graphical look across pages and parts of your site. Ideally, strive to keep a consistent look even across product pages and division pages. Let users know when links will take them to completely different websites for your company divisions or product sites.

19. Avoid too much text or very small text on a page. Make it easy to scan pages by dividing text into small chunks and using bold headlines. In our study, people said they did not want to read pages with too much text or tiny text, and skipped them.

SEARCH

*Discussion begins on **page 69.***

20. Provide obvious search capabilities for searching the entire site or parts of the site, and include all company and press information.

UI DESIGN ELEMENTS

*Discussion begins on **page 71.***

21. Deviate from using standard UI design elements only if your new design is far superior to the standard.

GRAPHICS AND IMAGES

*Discussion begins on **page 74.***

22. Avoid any superfluous graphics, particularly ones that impact speed. People were angry when they had to wait for graphics to load, especially when the graphic was useless.

23. Provide high-resolution downloadable images of your products and high-level managers.

24. Make it easy to print anything of interest on your site, including simple versions of annual reports, press releases, product information, and manager bios.

MOVEMENT, MULTIMEDIA, MOVIES, AND PDF FILES

*Discussion begins on **page 81.***

25. Avoid multimedia demos on the homepage and the press page. People did not want to wait for demos to load just to get to the homepage or find a press contact. If you do use demos, provide an obvious, fast way to skip them.

26. Do not require people to install any software to look at your products, annual reports, or press releases. People with slow connections, old computers, and Macintoshes had problems viewing PDF files and some demos. If you provide important information about management and the financials in a PDF, you should also provide the same information on regular HTML pages. You can offer PDF files as an option for printing, but you should always offer all basic information on a standard Web page, too.

27. For annual reports or other PDF files, offer a Table of Contents in front and an alphabetical index in the back.

NUMBERS AND INTERNATIONAL FORMATS

*Discussion begins on **page 89**.*

28. Consider international users when presenting data, especially when presenting dates of press releases and news releases. Write out the month so that there's no confusion: 9/1 means September 1 to Americans and January 9 to Europeans. Several times during our study, releases and news items appeared stale to people who didn't remember or understand how European and U.S. date formats differ.

29. If you regularly deal with people in foreign countries, convert financial data to those currencies.

PERFORMANCE

*Discussion begins on **page 90**.*

30. Technology companies in particular need to eliminate bugs, broken links, and slow servers. People are less forgiving of these errors on technology companies' websites.

PRESENCE ON THE WEB

*Discussion begins on **pages 18 and 93.***

31. Make sure your company has a presence at www.google.com and other popular search engines. Several participants said they would go to search engines first, and if they couldn't find what they were looking for on the company's site.

32. Make your company's URL easy to guess. In most cases, the company name or a simple acronym is the most obvious address. It is also smart to register not only the company name as a domain name, but also any very obvious potential misspellings. Note: If possible, offer a country-translated/localized version for countries your company deals with.

How Journalists Use the Web

WHY JOURNALISTS VISIT A COMPANY'S WEBSITE

During the studies, journalists noted the following top reasons for using a company's website:

- To find a PR contact name and telephone number.
- To check facts, such as a person's bio, a person's age, the location of company headquarters, and so on.
- To learn how the company wants to be perceived, or what spin they are putting on a story.
- To check financial information.
- To download images.

WHAT THEY DO FIRST

When asked to get basic information about a company, different people started out in different ways. All users said they would begin by doing some kind of research on the Web.

Some people chose to go right to the company site. Forty-five percent of the users typed *www.*, then the company name as one word, then typically *.com* (or *.gov* or *.dk*).

> *"I try it, and whenever that hits for me it saves me the difficulty of using the search engine."*

Other people first looked at outside sources to get information about the company. Thirty percent of the users went to www.Google.com and typed the company name in the search bar.[3] Other places people went first include: Dow Jones Interactive subscription, Wall Street Journal subscription, Yahoo, and Lexis-Nexis.

> *"I think looking at something like Google gives you a good overview of not just what the company says about itself, but what other people are saying about the company."*

> *"My editor wants to know if anyone else just did a piece so we don't do the same thing."*

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[3] A note on the use of Google: The screenshots in this report show a Google bar in the browser. That's because they were made on our office computer which happens to have this browser add-on installed. Our user tests, however, took place at the users' locations using their equipment, so they did not have a Google bar on their browser (unless they had installed it themselves). Thus, we did not bias the study in favor of Google, so the finding that 30% of the journalists used this search engine is powerful testimony to its current status as one of the premiere research tools on the Web.

> *"Yahoo Finance burrows down to get the… SEC results. I will look to see if any important filings came out recently."*

All journalists did want to go to the company's website at some point, even if it was not the first place they would look on the Web. Users assumed that typing *www.*, then the company name, then *.com* would take them to the website, and it typically did. The exceptions are www.uspatentandtrademarkoffice.gov, and www.uspatentoffice.gov. Neither of these worked; the only thing that did was www.uspto.gov. In some cases, people misspelled the company name—*Merc* instead of the correct *Merck* and *Benneton* instead of the correct *Benetton*. Neither misspelling brought up the company site, or any site. When a user spelled Philip Morris with two l's, it did still find the site, which was helpful.

A few Danish journalists first looked for www.compnayname.dk for the Danish version of the site.

When people had librarians or researchers at their disposal, they generally used them only to get facts they thought they could not access over the Web. In one case, a journalist's company had a news service subscription, but it was accessible only through the company librarian and the journalist had to contact him to use it.

HOW EVEN SHORT VISITS TO YOUR SITE CAN IMPACT USERS' PERCEPTION

A short visit to your website can change a person's perception of your company or products for better or worse. This has even more impact when the visitor is a journalist who intends to write about your company. One point that many companies seem not to believe or understand is that it is often better to have no website at all than to put out a website that lacks careful, thoughtful design. Bad sites can have a negative effect on visitors, and journalists are no different. While these are anecdotal points, this is a very important lesson to take from this study. After an unpleasant experience using a site, one journalist said:

> *"It behooves the company to make their websites easier to use. You immediately begin to hate the company when it's not. Especially when you can't find something as simple as the earnings. Also, no PR contact. For journalists that's very annoying."*

In our test sessions, users' first task was to get basic information about a specific company. People usually offered us their preconceptions as well. For example, one user said that he initially thought Benetton was a very socially responsible company. But, after looking for information in the site's *Who We Are* and *What We Do* sections, the same user said:

> *"Socially responsible—not really I see. Nothing here is really telling me about their responsibility…. I would expect them to be making some sort of statement about what they believe in and why they support these causes. Having only seen this in their ads, I would be sort of cynical because I only see ads, which benefit them really, and no beliefs or assistance."*

One user had a very negative impression of Philip Morris, but changed it a bit after the session, saying:

> *"I found out they are more socially responsible than I thought."*

On the negative side, however, she originally considered them to be a well-established, organized company. But, the fact that she could not find any contact information made her believe they were less organized and established, and didn't welcome contact with the press. She said:

> *"The trouble is finding any way to find contact information for them to discuss any pre-conceived notion of the company. It really seems that they are not too happy in dealing with questions from the public. That, or they are very clumsy. Maybe they haven't even thought of any way for people to get in contact with them. It must be they don't want too many contacts."*

> Another journalist said:

> *"What I knew about the firm was that they produced cigarettes. I did not know they produced liquor or Kraft foods. I did not know that."*

One user had never heard of Fidelity and had no idea what industry the company was in. After using the site, he said:

> *"I did not know the company before. But now I think it probably is well established, judging on the number of accounts they manage. They are probably a very big company. I wouldn't be surprised if they turned out to be one of the leading companies for these types of funds."*

In another instance, a user had an initial perception that Nokia is an international company. After spending some time on the site, and looking at many of the management bios and pictures, he said:

> *"They say they are global, but if they all are Finnish, it doesn't seem very global to me. Their management is not diverse… the company probably isn't international."*

His initial perception that Nokia was an international company changed somewhat after getting information from the site. Also, he was pleasantly surprised by some of the other information he found.

> *"They are very committed to digital and TV. I always thought of them as a mobile phone company. Since digital TV is something new, I think it is quite interesting."*

One user's initial comment about BMW was:

> *"It tends to seem to be maybe a little snobby or showy. I wouldn't buy one."*

This sentiment changed after using the site. After looking at pictures of cars in the *Products* section and reading more about both the cars and the company, this same user saw a particular picture and said:

> *"Now that is a beautiful car. I would buy that car. And, I know they drive really nicely."*

When one user opened the Wal-Mart site, she said:

> *"I guess I always think of them as the evil empire, descending into the small town and ripping the main streets out of these small towns."*

Later, after reading about their philanthropy programs, she said:

> *"Hmm. I never knew there was a Wal-Mart Foundation. This is cool, the causes they contribute to. Wow $163 million. I guess I'm impressed. That's a decent amount of money to be throwing into the community."*

QUOTES ABOUT PRESS CONTACT INFORMATION

The following are responses to the post-test question: Would you look on the website for a PR contact name and phone number? Why or why not?

These quotes substantiate the importance of giving press contacts on websites.

> *"Yes I would. It's often there and quicker to use than going to the yellow pages (on the Web)."*

> *"Yes, definitely. That's the first thing I'd look for instead of navigating the site on your own, you'd just want PR to tell you what you need to know."*

> *"Definitely. It's always nice to have a name when you call the PR department with questions, and if you read an article/press release, you would know who to ask for."*

> *"Yes, I would hope a name or number would be used somewhere in the website to lessen the amount of footwork I need to do."*

> *"Yes, because it is easy and might even get some background information on the person I am going to talk to."*

> *"Yes. One, I always talk to a live person in addition to getting information online. Two, the information online was not substantial enough to do in-depth reportorial queries."*

> *"I would, but it's not there. That's hugely stupid and frustrating."*

> *"I would indeed, and after a few small difficulties, I might find it, too! In general, I would feel the need to talk to a PR person because after a solid hour, I was well short of finding some of the most rudimentary information about the company for my article."*

"Yes, I'm used to finding such information on corporate websites."

"Yes, but I couldn't find one. It's a natural first stop for any reporter."

"Yes, for a journalist, the most important information is the name of the PR person with a US number to call. If that's not easy to find, the rest doesn't matter as much."

PRINTING WEBSITE INFORMATION

Almost all of the study participants said at least once that they would print out something from the site. People tended to find information, then print it so they could review, study, or collect it.

"Before I even read this, I would print it out. I like to just print out everything even if it's only a little interesting. Then I take all the paper and read through it and mark it up and take the things that are most pertinent."

For longer-term projects, some people keep piles or folders of printed information. Sometimes they save the printouts for some grace period after the story has been completed and printed. Sometimes they save the information indefinitely if it was difficult to find.

"If I am working on a story I tend to keep things in piles. Since I'm working on a daily, I'm not hanging onto information for days on end. It's more like hours on end. Like yesterday I was doing two stories and at the end of the day I moved the paper over to the right desk here, like my source box. I clean it out about every month or so. I don't tend to save too much, only stuff that is hard to get like some internal company document."

Other people print because they don't like, or feel less efficient, reading a lot of text online. Most importantly, journalists print facts and like to annotate, and write all over the paper they print out.

"The Web is a lot of eyestrain, a lot of clicking and waiting. Flipping through a magazine is a lot more pleasurable. Even if e-mail is really long, I will just print them and read them off a white paper…. There's something nice about print on a page, warmer than flickering graphics on a screen."

"That page is too packed. Need more air between the lines or a scheme, like the stock chart, put in some figures, different diagrams to show what they are telling here. You have to be very patient to read all that on a website. At first glance I think, 'Whoa, hard to read because so compact,' so I would print it out."

People generally seemed annoyed when backgrounds, large graphics, or very large text appeared on printouts.

"Basically one website I was looking at… the background was black on the page and the type was enormous, so it made the prospect of printing bad. Printing needs to be easy… I hate stuff like this."

More than one person said that when this happened, their workaround was to select the text, copy it, paste it into some word processor, and print it from there. With this in mind, good sites will make it easy to print pages.

HOW JOURNALISTS USE PRESS RELEASES

The main reasons journalist said they use press releases are to learn how a company wants you to think about something, and to get a contact name specific to the topic in the release. They also use releases for basic background information about a product or event.

"I understand everyone's hype about their product. The hype helps me understand the positioning of a product. It helps me understand how they are out selling to customers. [I always ask] is this true, not true… I take everything with the grain of salt, until someone has tested it."

"I almost never read them. Only if there is an event that I have to know the company's take on it. If I need to know their angle, I will read it, or numbers from a deal or acquisition for stock. Otherwise I almost never use them."

"I might look at the quick facts and see some of the info. About assets, funds, this is info. I would print out. I may not use it in the story, but just so I understand the company a little better. Sometimes I even get into the news center archive and see what they have. It can be very interesting especially if they changed their outlook but didn't change the text."

"I believe it's what the company wants me to think. I am very skeptical about that. It's useful to see what the company wants me to know. A lot of times the facts are right, but they place in a positive context for the company. It's helpful to see how company wants us to see things."

"Oh, it's just boring press releases. You can never trust a press release."

"You can't say you don't trust press releases, but it is not like the whole truth. But looking at the page you see how they look at it. There is some truth in it, but I still have to talk to people there. Check it out... There's probably some truth in it. Why else would they spend forces saying it? Someone might check up on it. If it is not true, it would be much easier to keep quiet. As a journalist, of course, you are always suspicious."

"I use them as a backgrounder. For instance, I'm doing a story now where the company sent it [a release] to me. I would never take the quotes from the release. As far as getting random press releases, I never read them."

"I do not read press releases, especially here where they have links to news clips available—I'd read that instead of their own. I trust other journalists more."

"I guess with a lot of sites, they have really old press releases…"

"Seems like if there is more information about what a company is coming up with, it would be helpful."

"The more controversial, the more I have to check it. Generally I would not just take the information. You never really write an article without talking to some people. Check the facts."

Findings and Recommendations: Site-Specific Examples

WINNERS

Since some sites preformed considerably better or worse than others in different areas, there wasn't a clear overall winner. However, we can declare certain sites superior for specific areas or tasks. These are:

General site organization	Tellme.com Note: SeeItFirst was a close second; it might have surpassed Tellme.com if people were not so annoyed and distracted by the persistent multimedia movement in the left-hand navigator.
Finding press contacts	Uspto.gov (US Patent Office)
International press contacts	Nokia.com
Information about company management	Nokia.com Note: If there are senior-level managers based in countries other than Finland, these should also be added.
Presentation of press releases	Seeitfirst.com
Presentation of news coverage	Tellme.com
Financial information	Merck.com
Information about company philanthropy of social responsibility	Walmart.com

What follows are examples of designs that worked well, and those that journalists had difficulties using. All sites had usability issues. You can review the examples that follow and avoid those problems on your site. On all sites, there were some designs or features that added to the ease-of-use. Since all websites are different, there is no guarantee that duplicating the exact designs appearing on these sites will work on your site. However, the examples below of sites that worked well can be adapted so they work just as well on your site.

Press Contact Information

>PROVIDE PRESS CONTACT NAMES AND PHONE NUMBERS
In February 2001, an experienced Web user at Nielsen Norman Group surveyed Fortune 50 Company websites. One of the goals was to find a PR or press contact telephone number in five minutes or less. She was successful in completing this task with only 24% of these 50 sites, with an average lapsed time of four minutes and 14 seconds.

In our user studies with journalists, we set no time limit on finding the press contact telephone number. We did find that the target sites had many usability issues with providing press contacts. We also learned that it's extremely important to journalists to be able to find this information quickly.

> *"This is what I would love. This is the dream: homepage link to a Press Room and see a name, number, and their e-mail address."*

On the U.S. Patent Office site, a contact number was easy to find and appeared in three places: the *Contact Us* area, in the top navigator on many pages, and within the press releases.

U.S. Patent Office> Contact Us
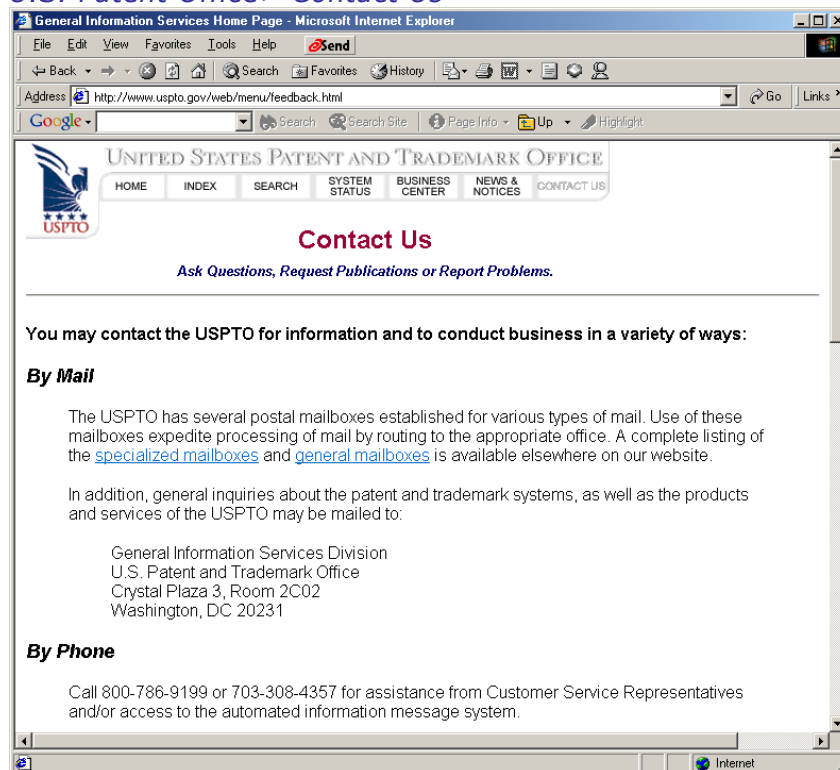
U.S. Patent Office> Press Release
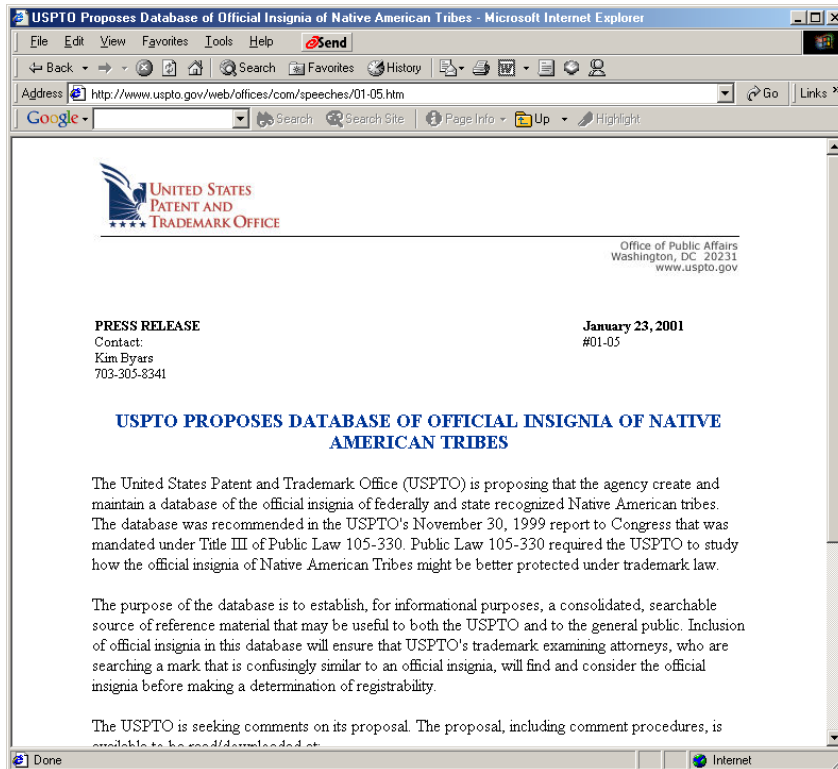
On the SeeItFirst site, one user could not find a contact name, just the phone number. Another found a generic PR e-mail address.

> *"They just have the 800 number. That sucks. How do you put out a press release with no contact?"*

> *"When you see publicrelations@seeitfirst.com you know it just goes into a pile."*

On the Merck site, a user could not find the press contact number.

> *"And what's very strange and I hate is there is no contact info here on the site. I am interested and I go to press releases and there is nothing."*

> *"Pretty common, like 20 to 30 percent of the time, they don't have the number. It's just lame."*

On the Benetton site, the *Press Area* and *Contact* links are next to each other on the homepage. Users clicked the *Press Area* link, not the *Contact* link (where the number is), to find a press contact name.

> *"I am just digging for a phone number here. It really seems like they don't want me to call them…. Not good at all. They were using their website to give generic info, but not get inside the company. Very*

closed to me. They don't want me to contact them…. This may just be a poorly designed site."

Benetton Home

Also on the Benetton site, the press contact e-mail address is a generic *press@benetton.it.* Users wanted a person's name.

> *"Sometimes I have to click* contact us *and I get an e-mail window and that's frustrating because I'm on a tight deadline and I don't want mine to get lost with many others, so I don't use that.*

On the BMW site, finding a PR contact was difficult.

> "BMW Individual *maybe. I'm not sure what* BMW Individual *stands for. I am not happy with the choices. Seems like a simple request [finding the PR contact]. It may be they want to discourage it. That they don't want you to talk to them, but I think that's a bad idea…. Here I'm just fishing. This is the part I never like. I have no confidence when I hit something that it'll get me to where I want to go. This is what eats up all my time when I look for something on the net. It just eats and eats and eats."*

> *"I would really call. It's not to their interest to have people like me calling their PR person all the time. No contact person in the press release. Why is there no contact person in the release?"*

>PROVIDE INTERNATIONAL PRESS CONTACTS AND PHONE NUMBERS

Nokia's site offers press contact telephone numbers in various countries around the world. They also give addresses, high-level manager's names, and a few e-mail addresses, though they are generic names and not a person's name.

Nokia> Press services> Contact Information
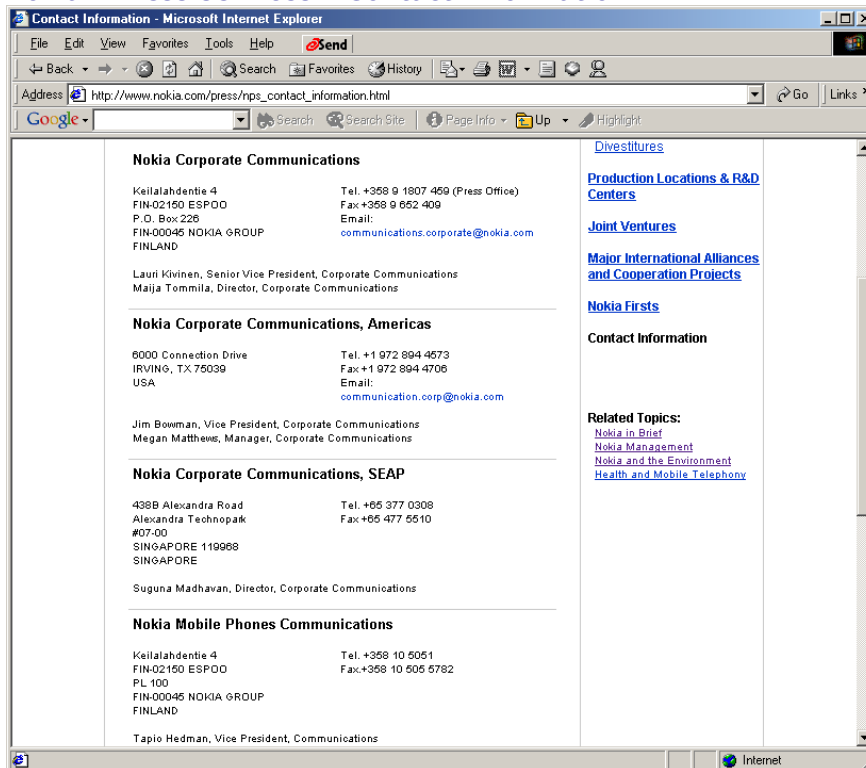
Benetton, a company based in Italy, offered a contact telephone number in Italy. The U.S. journalists were less likely to call a press contact if they only had an Italian phone number. The journalists gave two reasons for not wanting to call another country. First, they assumed the person on the other end would speak the language of their own country, and they didn't want to ask them to speak English. Second, they didn't want to pay for an international phone call. The latter was especially true for freelance journalists working from their home.

> *"Just personally, I would be less likely to call this, asking them to speak English on the phone."*

> *"For me, the most important thing is a U.S. media relations contact. I couldn't find a good PR contact and just an Italian phone number. I probably wouldn't call it."*

> *"The best thing to do is give a name or several people to contact. It would be nice if there were a toll free number instead of a number in Italy. They have to have some U.S. contacts. But maybe that was in that Shockwave thing I couldn't get past."*

On the BMW site, one user found a press contact in a press release after much searching.

> *"… wait. Here is a telephone number. Finally. It's in Germany though and it doesn't give you a person. I think they make journalists work too hard to find very basic stuff."*

On the Fidelity site, the user clicked the *Contact Us* tab and a page with text appeared, but no contact name or phone number.

> *"I am immediately disappointed. I would expect there to be something like I have seen on other sites where there is a name and e-mail and some information about PR people."*

Fidelity> Contact Us
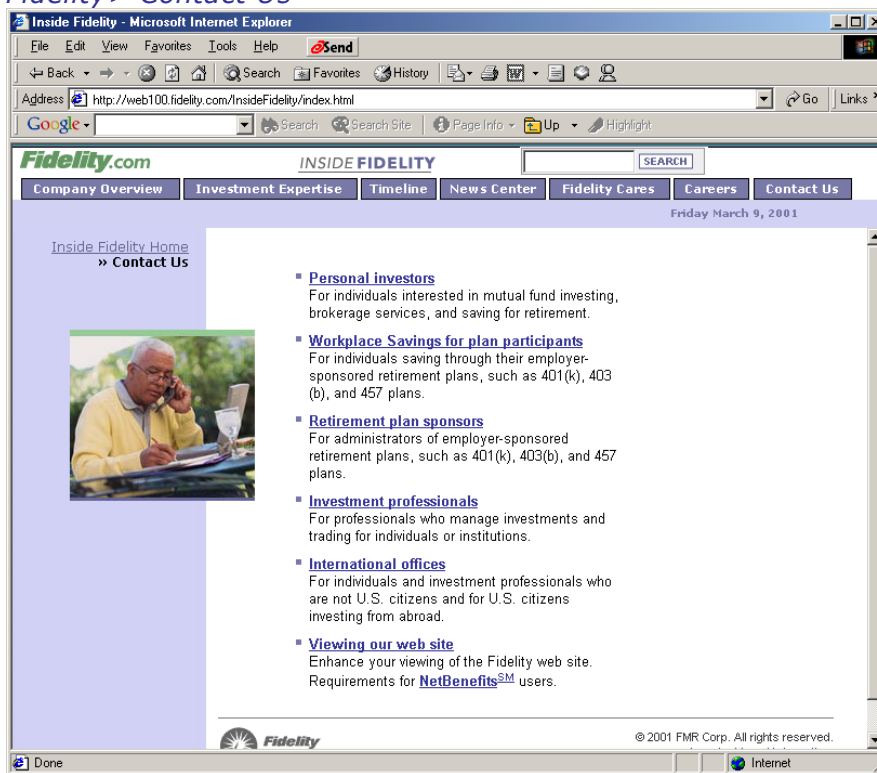
On the Philip Morris site, it was difficult to find press contact telephone numbers.

> *"I see there is an e-mail address. They don't want to be bothered with incoming calls or e-mails. That's the way it seems. It's rather annoying as a journalist not to be able to contact the firm."*

>DO NOT REQUIRE JOURNALISTS TO REGISTER OR FILL OUT FORMS
Asking journalists to fill something out is a sure way to deter them from writing about your company. Like typical Web users, they do not want to spend the time registering for something when they may or may not receive any payoff for their efforts. And, as journalists, they do not want to get inundated with e-mail from PR people at companies.

"The only thing that would really bug me is… they ask you to fill in a form and information, but they don't give me an e-mail or phone number…. You feel like you have no control contacting them."

On the Benetton site, when users went to the *Press* area and clicked the *Press Contacts* link, a registration page appeared.

"This would really bother me. I do not want register and get inundated with contacts. I don't feel like registering…. I understand if they want me to register so their PR person won't get inundated. But they are allowing me to get inundated. I find this [registration required] a lot with high-end products. Nine times out of 10 I register as John Doe."

In this case, he proceeded to skip past the registration page and went to the press releases to see if there was a contact name and telephone number there.

Benetton Press Area> Press Contacts> Register
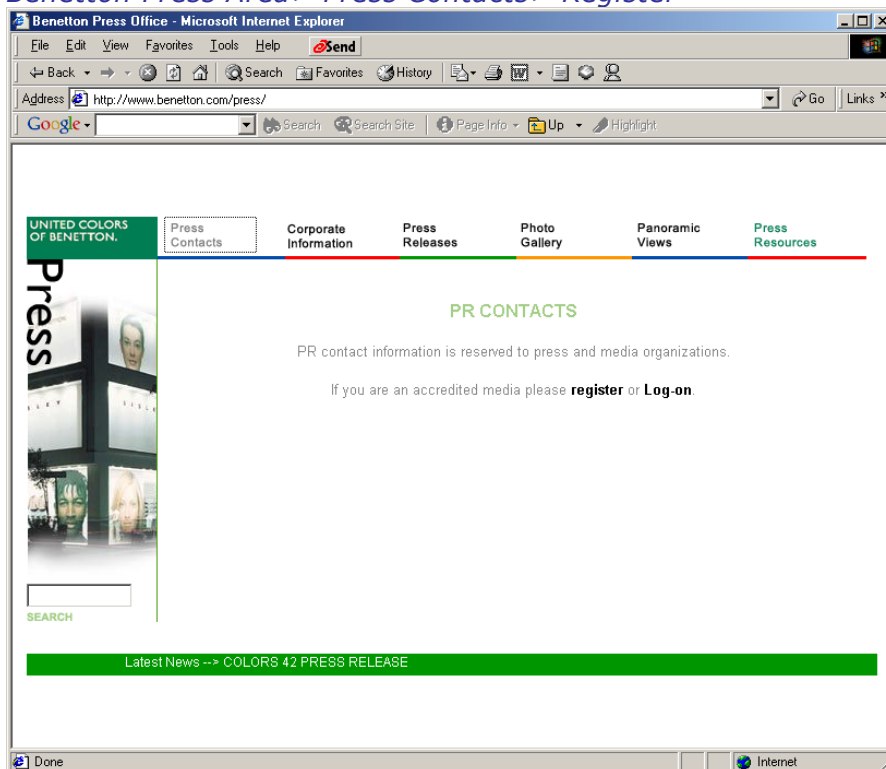
On the *Press Release* section of the Nokia site, one journalist saw the *Subscribe* and *Unsubscribe* links.

"Looks like you have to subscribe. I see something up here about subscribing. I hope that doesn't mean I have to pay to read them. Maybe it means they send them to me. It would never happen that I would need to be updated by any company about press releases."

On the Philip Morris site, the *Feedback* link opens a form to fill out.

> *"This is not what I expected. This is just a form about the website. I wouldn't fill this out."*

Philip Morris> Feedback

Press Releases and News

ORGANIZING LISTS OF PRESS PELEASES

Following are two examples of well-organized press sections of websites. The sites are good for many reasons, including:

- The releases are organized so that the most recent one is first in the list.

- You have the option to re-order the list of releases based on how you want to see them.

- There is a category for each release.

- The release title is a clear link; they also provide a short description of the release below the title. Also, the page is clearly labeled *Press Releases,* which eliminates the possibility of people confusing them with news clips.

- Each release shows the date with the month written out to help eliminate international date issues.[4] We could possibly do without the *th,* as in 8th.

Example of a well presented list of press releases

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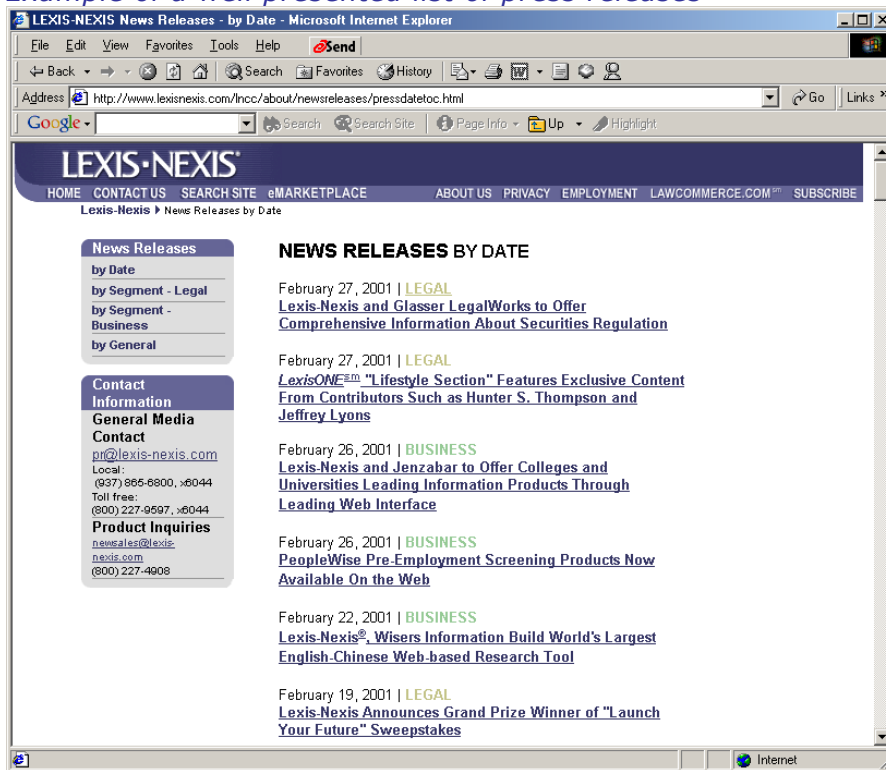
[4] Elisa del Galdo and Jakob Nielsen: *International User Interfaces*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1996. ISBN 0-471-14965-9.

Second example of a well presented list of press releases
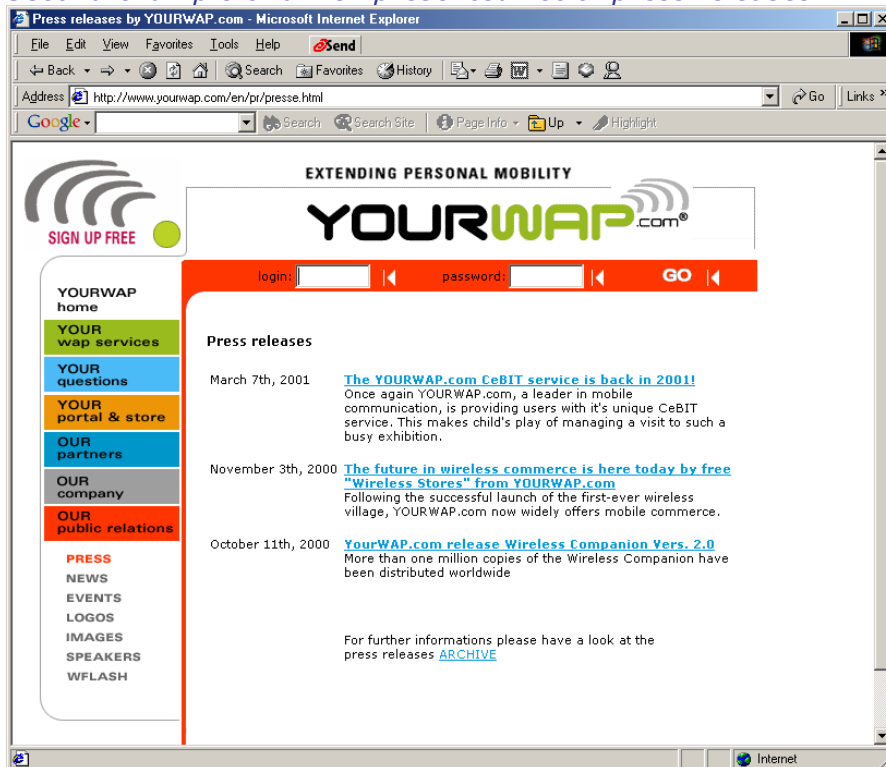
YOURWAP.com also does a good job of presenting the actual press release, as the following examples demonstrate. Typically, the release text itself is a bit too long. Even so, it has the general components journalists need, and presents them well for several reasons:

- The bolded title and the summary are clearly marked at the top, so users know that the link they clicked brought them to the right document.

- The date of the release is clearly presented.

- The press contacts are clearly stated at the bottom of the release.

- The press contact information includes the name of the firm, so journalists know whether they are calling the company's in-house PR department or an outsourced one.

- The press contact information includes a person's name, a telephone and fax number, a mailing address, and an actual person's e-mail address.

Example of a good press release
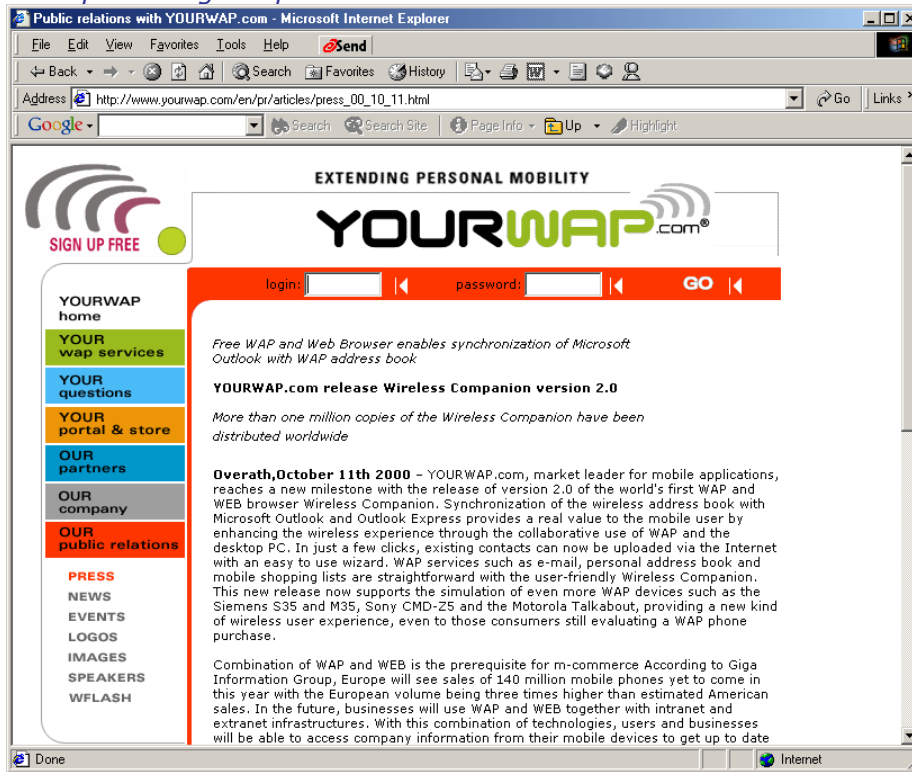
Example of a good press release, scrolled
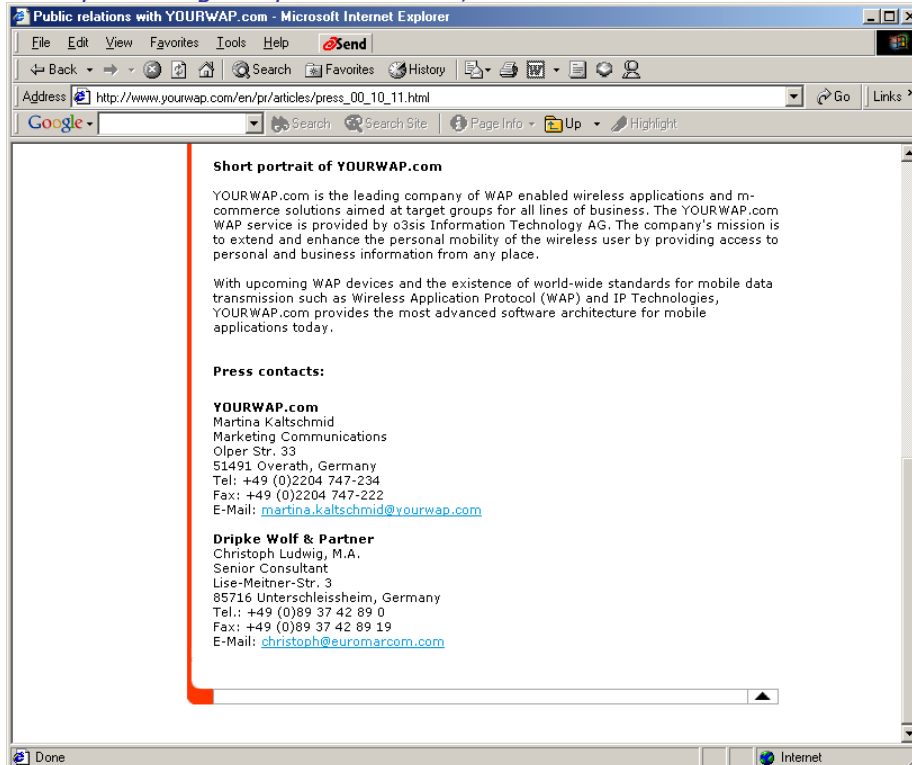
HOW THE SITES STUDIED ORGANIZE PRESS RELEASES

The following tables describe how the studied sites present their press releases. The sites are scored based on the criteria that worked well for journalists. Sites are given a point or ½ point for each positive attribute, for the highest possible score of 12 points.

	PRESS RELEASE PRESENTATION SCORE (HIGHEST POSSIBLE IS 12)
SeeItFirst	11
Nokia	10
United Colors of Benetton	8.5
Fidelity	8
United States Patent Office	8
Philip Morris	7
BMW	6.5
Wal-Mart	6
Merck	5
Tellme	5

In the following tables, **less usable** designs are indicated with **blue bold** text.

	SHOWS A LIST OF PRESS RELEASES ON A PAGE/ AREA	SHOWS A DATE IN THE LIST	DATE FORMAT IN THE LIST	DATE FORMAT IN THE RELEASE
BMW	Yes, in *Top News*	Yes	**06.02.2001** This is different on the current day, which is displayed as: Today, 7 January, 2001	**06.02.2001** This is different on the current day, which is displayed as: Today, 7 January, 2001
Fidelity	Yes	Yes	January 26, 2001	January 26, 2001
Merck	There are two different press release areas. 1) About Merck>General Info.>Press Releases- No 2) About Merck>Financial>Press Releases- Yes	Yes	**None**	Jan. 23, 2001
Nokia	Yes	Yes	February 06, 2001	February 06, 2001
Philip Morris	Yes	Yes	**1/24/2001**	Jan. 24, 2001
SeeItFirst	Yes	Yes	December 12, 2000	Dec. 12, 2000
Tellme	Yes, in Company	Yes	**10-03-2000**	**None**

	Info.>Press Kit			
United Colors of Benetton	Yes	Yes	NOVEMBER 15, 2000	15 November 2000
United States Patent Office	Yes	Yes	**1/23/2001**	January 23, 2001
Wal-Mart	Yes, in Press Room	Yes	Dec. 1, 2000	Dec. 1, 2000

	LIST SORTED BY MOST RECENT FIRST	ORGANIZED BY YEAR, THEN MONTH OR QUARTER
BMW	Yes	**No, one long list**
Fidelity	Yes, even shows "Today's releases"	No, last 30 days, the rest are in archive
Merck	Yes	Yes, year then quarter
Nokia	Yes	No, last 30 days, the rest are in archive
Philip Morris	Yes	**No, one long list**
SeeItFirst	Yes	**No**
Tellme	Yes	**No**
United Colors of Benetton	Yes	Yes, organized by year, then topic
United States Patent Office	Yes	Yes, year then month
Wal-Mart	**No, most recent is last**	**No, one long list**

	DISPLAY TITLE IN THE LIST	DISPLAY SHORT DESCRIPTION IN THE LIST	IN PRESS AREA, GIVE NAME, TELEPHONE, AND E-MAIL
BMW	Yes	Yes	Yes to telephone and postal address (in *Dialog* area); also gives numbers and addresses for different countries
Fidelity	Yes	**No**	**No**
Merck	Yes	**No**	**1) No, link just opens a press release** **2) In *About Merck>Financial> Press Releases*, no contact names, numbers, or e-mail addresses.**
Nokia	Yes	**No**	Yes; they even give several international contacts
Philip Morris	Yes	**No**	**No**
SeeItFirst	Yes	Yes	Yes, *News and Events>Press Room,*

			gives a name and contact
Tellme	Yes	**No**	Yes, scroll on *Press Kit* page lists two press contact names, e-mails, and telephone numbers
United Colors of Benetton	Yes	**No**	**No**
United States Patent Office	Yes	**No**	**No** *Press* **area.** Phone numbers and e-mails are listed In *Contact Us* area, **but no names.**
Wal-Mart	Yes	**No**	Yes, but you have to really look for it (click *Business Contacts*, scroll six times)

	IN PRESS RELEASE, GIVES CONTACT NAME	IN PRESS RELEASE, GIVES CONTACT TELEPHONE NUMBER	IN PRESS RELEASE, GIVES CONTACT E-MAIL ADDRESS
BMW	**No**	**No**	**No**
Fidelity	**No**	Yes	**No**
Merck	**No**	**No**	**No**
Nokia	**No**	Yes	Yes, but **not consistently**
Philip Morris	Yes, but **a few are missing the name**	Yes	**No**
SeeItFirst	Yes, but **a few are missing the name**	Yes	Yes
Tellme	**No**	**No**	**No**
United Colors of Benetton	Occasionally	Occasionally	Occasionally
United States Patent Office	Yes	Yes	**No**
Wal-Mart	**No**	**No**	**No**

>**PROVIDE LINKS TO NEWS ARTICLES**
In Nielsen Norman Group's study of e-commerce sites, the research found that links to outside sources are a good way to generate trust with customers.[5]

Tellme.com has very thorough coverage of their news items. The site has logos for publications that feature the news stories, giving journalists quick information about existing coverage. The article title, date, and author are all right there in the list,

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[5] *Trust: Design Guidelines for E-Commerce User Experience,* Nielsen Norman Group, 2001. See: http://www.nngroup.com/reports/ecommerce/trust.html

which also helps journalists determine when the company was last written about, and by whom. The best part is that they link to the actual articles in the various news publications, so journalists are not reading some abbreviated version that the PR department cut and annotated. Instead, the link goes right to the source, which people appreciated. It also seemed to give Tellme a little more credibility, because they were willing to link to the actual article and let it speak for itself.

Tellme> Company Info> News Coverage

On the SeeItFirst site, there are links to *News and Events>In the News*, which features a list of publication names, article titles, and dates. The publication name is in bold text and appears to be a link, but there are no links to the articles. Users clicked the bold text, but nothing happened.

SeeItFirst> News and Events> In the News
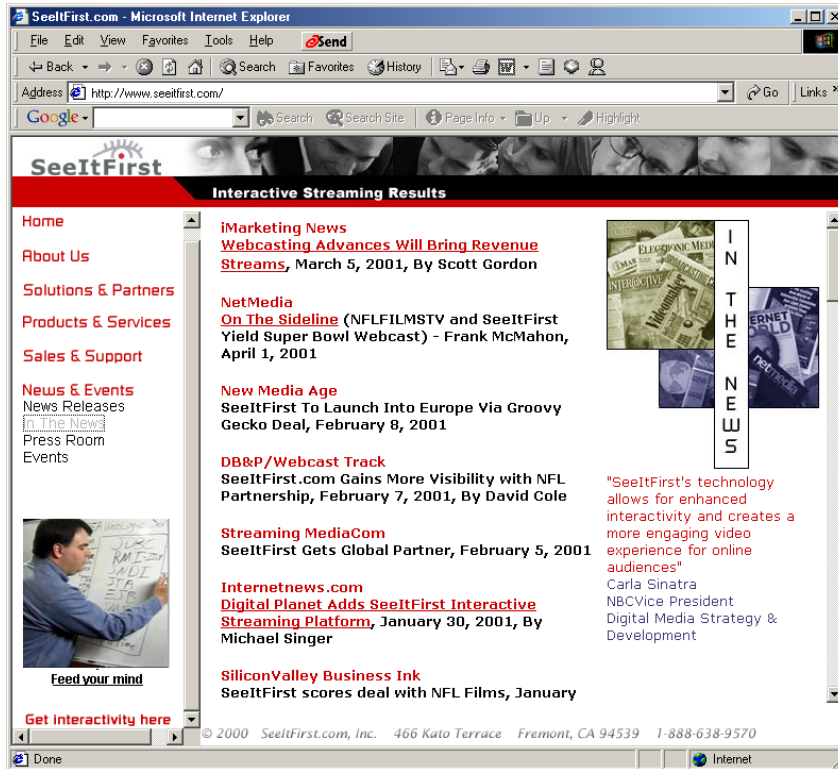
> *"Hey. Well that stinks. The articles should be here. I feel like I've been tricked. I would like to have seen the articles. Either they didn't want to take the time to load the articles, or maybe there were some parts of the articles they didn't want to talk about."*

>ORGANIZE PRESS AREA AND PRESS RELEASES AND MAKE THEM EASY TO FIND
The Benetton site offers a very visible *Press Area* link on the homepage.

> *"Has a press office that is not hard to find, which is good for me."*

On the BMW site, people had a difficult time finding press releases. They looked for press releases for quite a while when they were trying to find a PR contact name and telephone number.

> *"There should be a press room and they should call it something like 'Press Room.' "*

On the Merck site, the *Press Releases* link opens up to a single press release. Although it's possible that it's the most recent release, it doesn't seem likely since

the same one appeared from December 10, 2000 to (at least) March 10, 2001. Also, this persistent press release has no navigator linking to other press releases.

Merck> About Merck> General Info> Press Releases
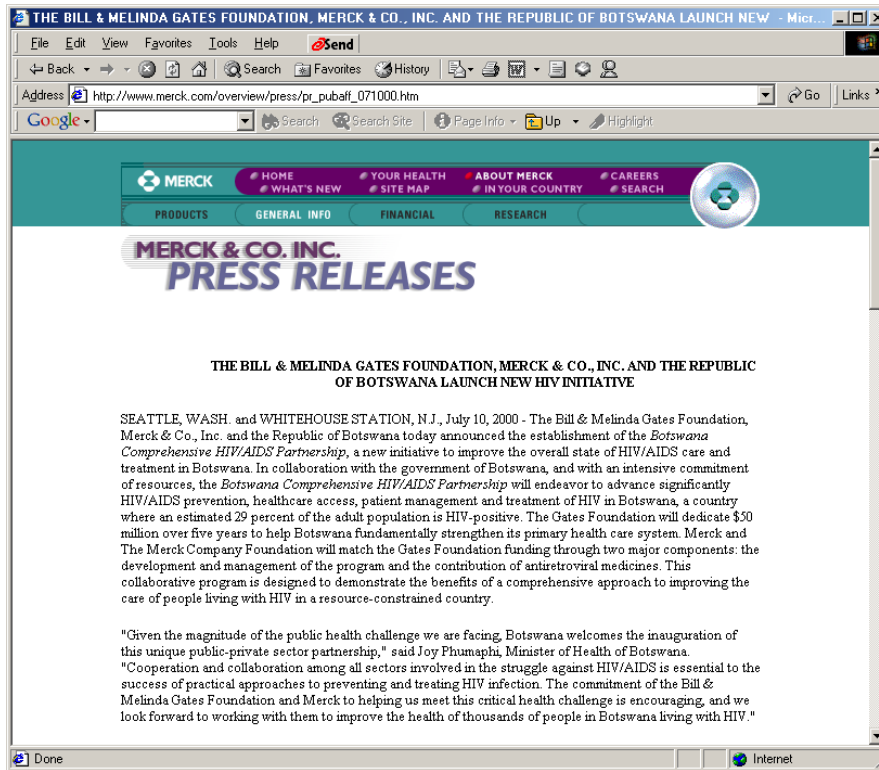
"You get one press release. This is a problem. The first thing we see is one press release from July 10 of last year. That pisses me off. This tells me they hadn't thought about this or it's some glitch."

"There is one press release here. I find that sort of amazing. Tells me they are not being particularly open…. Most companies will put up a PR page with links to all releases in the last year. I would think they would have hot-linked headlines… the better companies archive their press releases too."

The only way to get other press releases is to go to About Merck>Financial>Press Releases. There doesn't seem to be any other press releases on the site.

Merck> About Merck> Financial> Press Releases
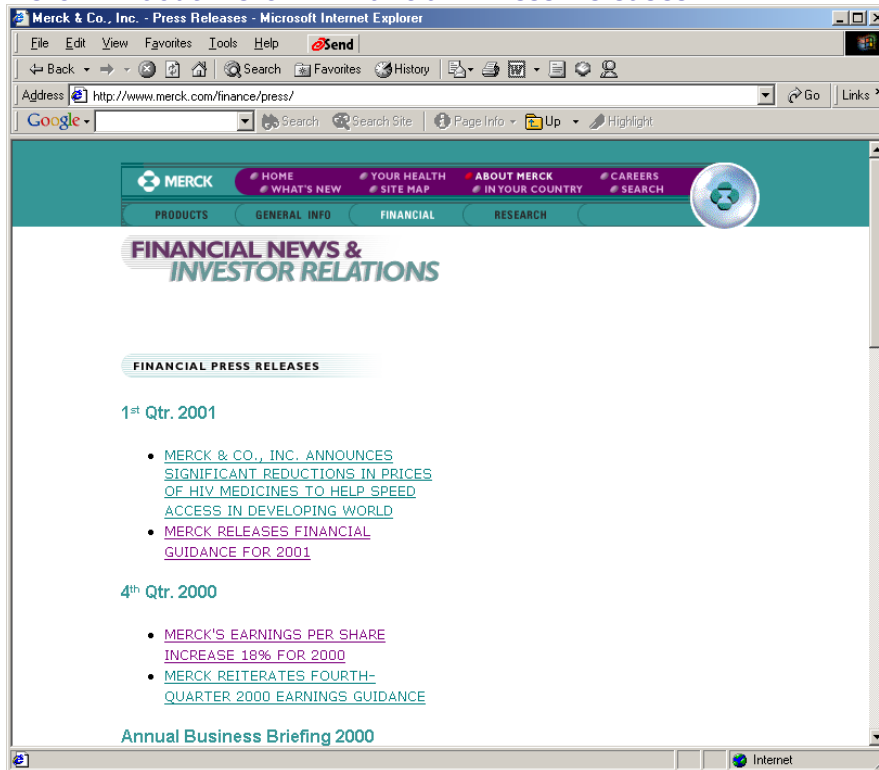
On the Tellme site, the date format in the press area confused European users, who write date first, then month.

Tellme> Company Info> Press Kit
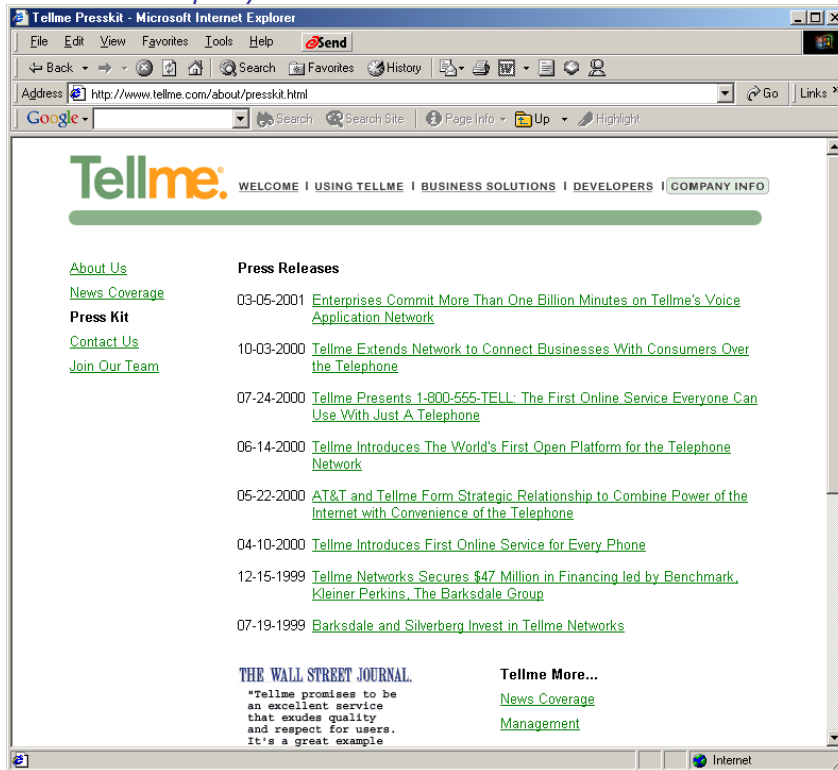
> *"They don't list [date] first. They list them weird. Oh wait—do you write month first? Then day? It's a European thing."*

On the Benetton site, there are two press-related areas, one titled *Press Releases,* and one titled *Press Resources.* The names were too similar for users to differentiate between them.

> *"Seems to be kind of vague. I wonder if they could have used better terminology or combined with press releases…."*

On the Benetton site, users were sometimes confused or annoyed by
meaningless terminology. For example, in the press photo gallery, one of the
links was named *Fabrica,* which both people commented on.

"Fabrica. I don' know what that is."

"I want to know before I click it."

Benetton> Press Area> Photo Gallery
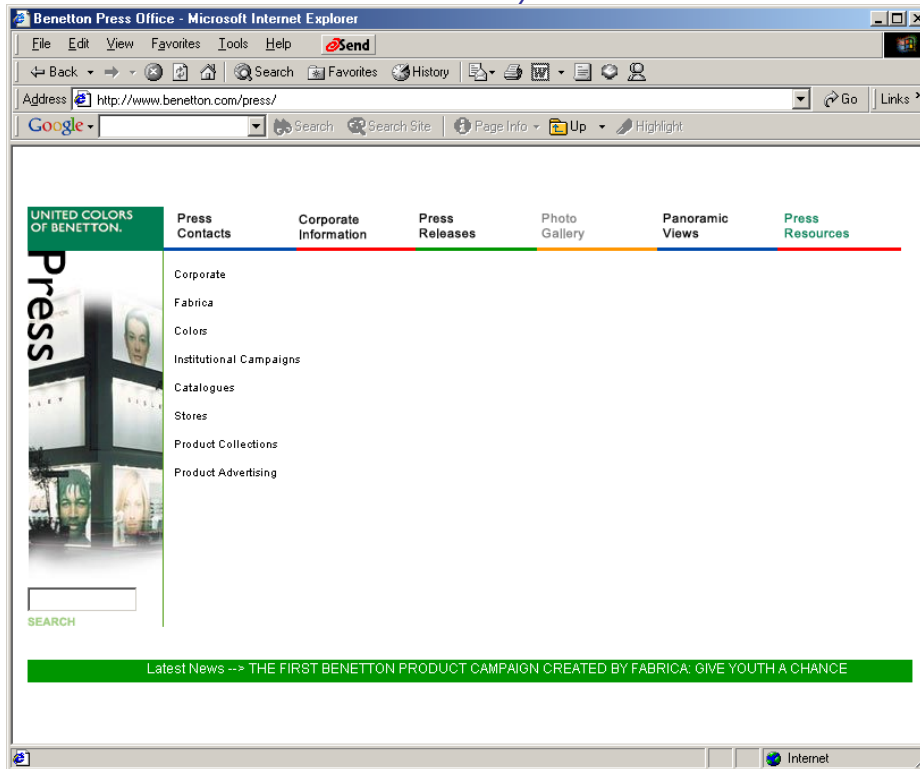
Content, Writing Style, and Facts

>PROVIDE FACTS AND INTERESTING CONTENT

In general, journalists were interested in facts. Sometimes these facts were offbeat things that elicited an "I didn't know that" response. Sometimes facts were as simple as the CEO's age. They typically scanned right past lines of text that seemed too marketing-oriented.

> *"We need to characterize the companies, not just say what they say. I look for facts…. You can smell it if they are trying to cover a bad fact."*

On the BMW site, one user was impressed by the safety information in the area.

BMW>Safety
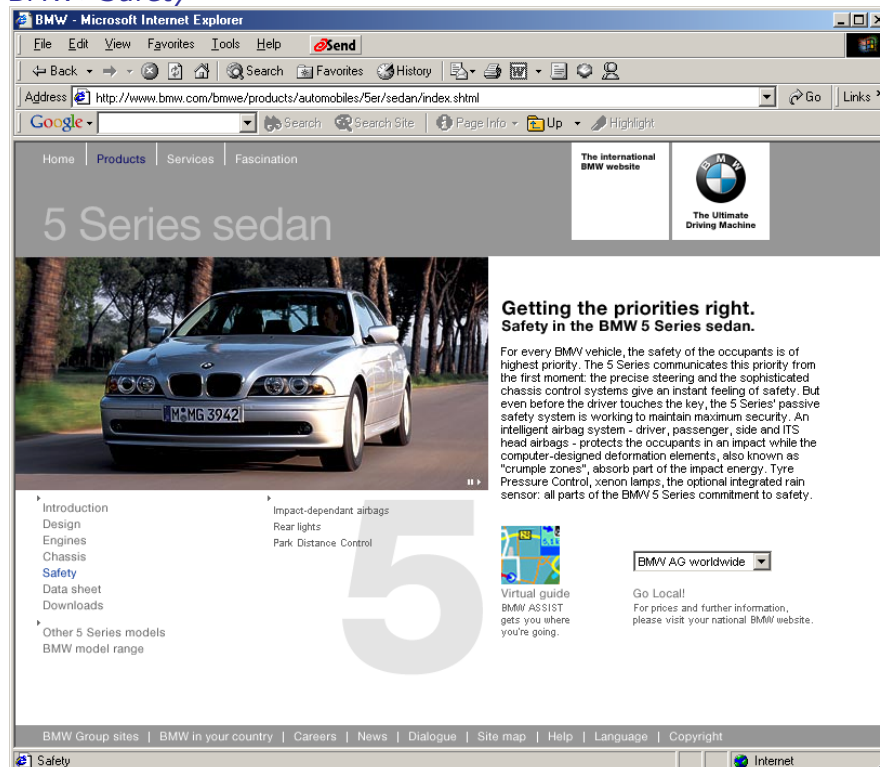
> *"Safety record—I would consider that a good piece of info. One of the reasons I think people buy expensive cars is that they will protect them more in an accident or help them prevent an accident…. This is actually more precise information. This is not a sales pitch. This term* crumple zone *I would find use for in my article… about the lights, these are all high-tech things that I think readers would find interesting. Those are the kinds of specifics I would be looking for."*

Also on the BMW site, a user searched for at least 10 minutes for what *BMW* stands for.

> *"Why does it not say on their website what BMW stands for? I'm hating the website now. I'll tell you want they need to do. Have a*

> *'News' place. Have a search engine. Have 'Finance' if they want people to know this. This is not very complicated."*

The U.S. Patent Office site provides a lot of good content about patents filed in the United States. Journalists who tested the site said they found the information very interesting and useful. There was not a lot of marketing or advertising there, just facts. They also offered a section for children, which people thought was a nice idea.

> *"Kids pages, oh that's nice. The fact that they have something for kids is kind of cool. It's nice they have something for kids, like kids want to invent things. You see shows about that all the time."*

USPTO> US Patents> Director's Corner> Annual Reports> 1998> Patents Overview
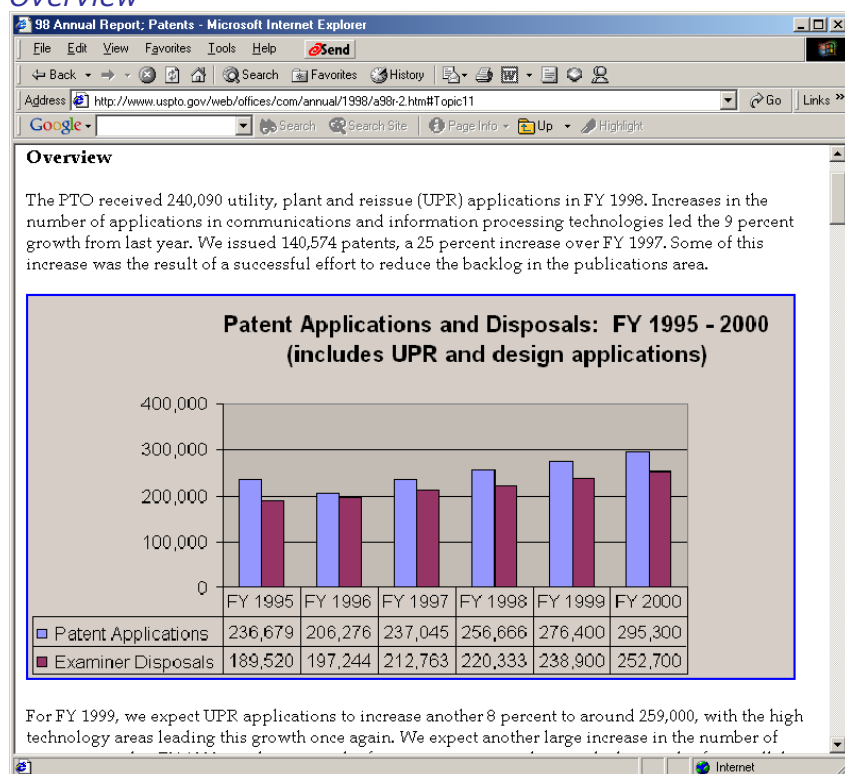
On the Benetton site, users liked the short fact pages in the *What We Make* section of the site.

Benetton> What We Make> Production> Dying Colors
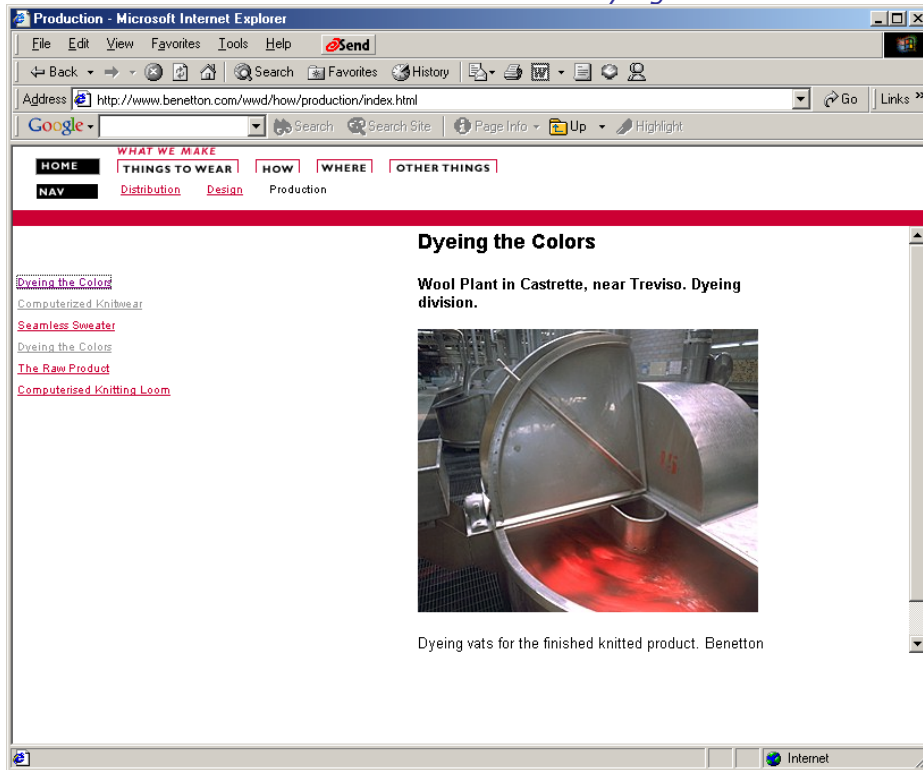
"*Those are fun statistics and facts.*"

On the Fidelity site, a journalist liked the facts about the funds.

Fidelity> Inside Fidelity> Company Overview
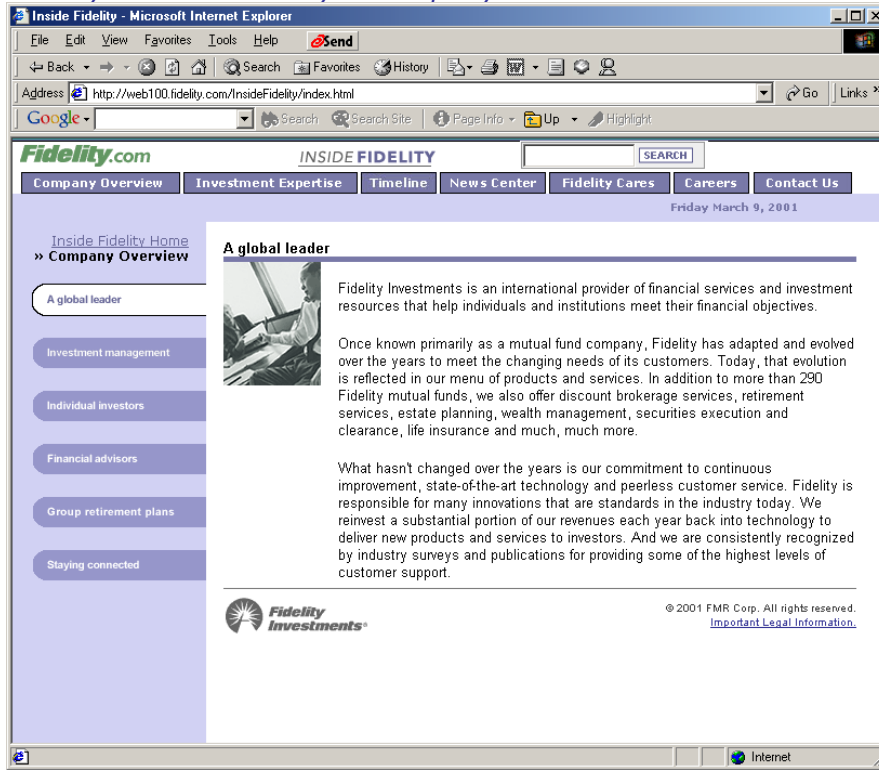
"*I like this part:* We have 290 funds. *That's a fact…. I would print this out. I do like facts.*"

On the Wal-Mart site, one journalist was particularly interested in the stock chart and enjoyed manipulating it.

Wal-Mart> Stock Chart
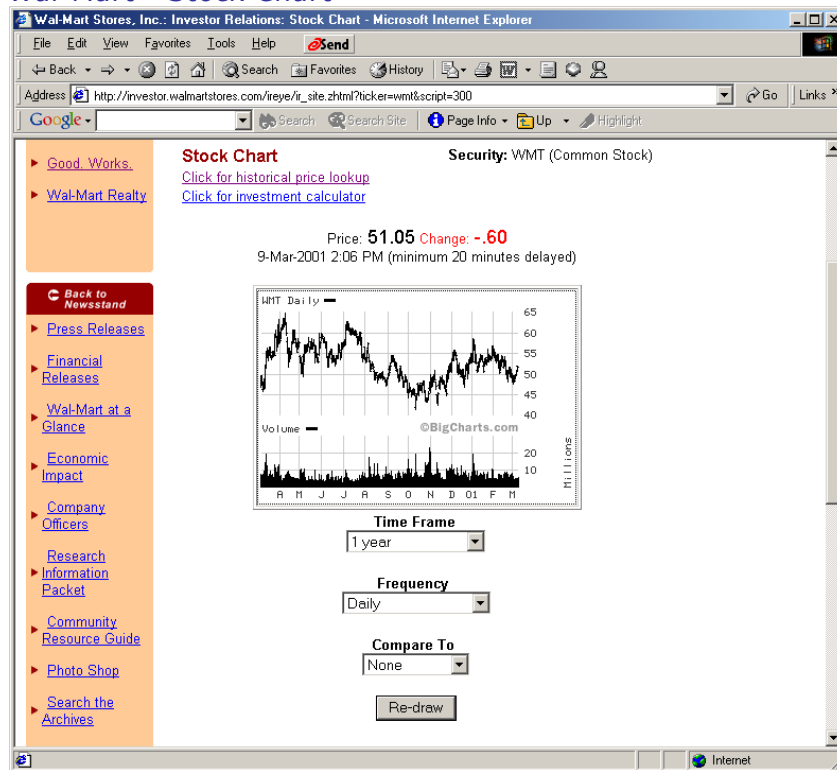
> *"Oh, a chart. Let's look. Seems to be doing okay in the face of the big bottoming out. I would say this is helpful, the chart. I'm changing the timeframe of the chart. That's pretty neat."*

Another journalist was impressed with how the Wal-Mart site explained the financial information in the *Steady as She Grows* section of the annual report.

> *"This is good because they explain the numbers and it's the important numbers that people really want to know. Good that they are up front about it. Here I can see their sales are over $137 billion and they're up from last year. Good to point out they have improved their sales, and almost 20%."*

>LIMIT SUPERFLUOUS INFORMATION AND MARKETING HYPE

Journalists did not appreciate extra background information that did not relate to the company. They were looking on the company site for information about the company and did not want to waste time with other information.

> *"A lot of the information companies give is gobbledygook. I won't be that interested unless it will really stand out to me and readers."*

On the Fidelity site, people commented on the generic information that was of no interest to them.

"One thing that strikes me is it's slightly out of date, 1996 and now it's 2001. Also, it doesn't have much to do with Fidelity, more like just about the U.S. on the left [of the screen]. The stuff on the right is more interesting, about the employees…. Again, says about the U.S. volunteerism. I don't care, I want to know what the company is doing."

"The Fidelity writing could have been more focused. Seemed like a mix like they weren't sure if they were writing for a working journalist or an investor. We want quick and facts and fast, instead of 40% of 8th graders can't read *and [information about]* Jackie Robinson. I understand there is a place for that, but seemed to be all mixed together."*

On the Benetton site, there was information about topics other than the actual clothing, especially about their advertising. That's what people found and ended up reading about most frequently. Maybe that's the goal of their site. However, finding clothing information and company information, besides their advertising, was not easy.

Benetton> What We Say> Campaign Images> Horses
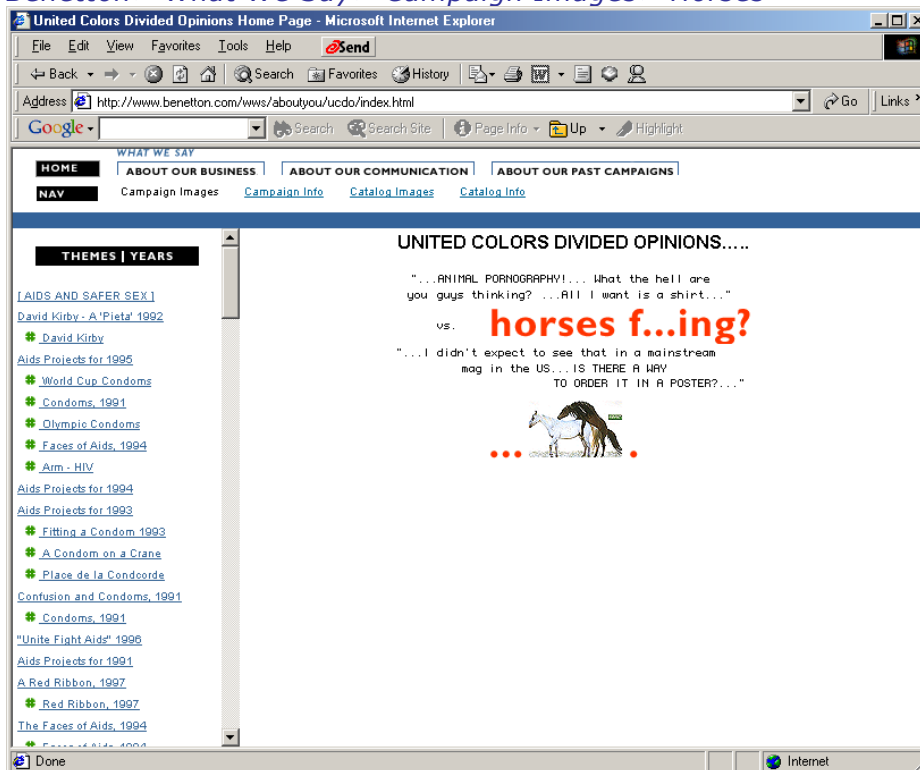
"That showed me in their company pages they do a lot, but I'm not sure where the company stands. Not sure where this [horse picture] fits…. Nothing here really tells me much."

"I wonder why in the world they have sports in particular for a clothing store."

Benetton> What We Say> Campaign Info
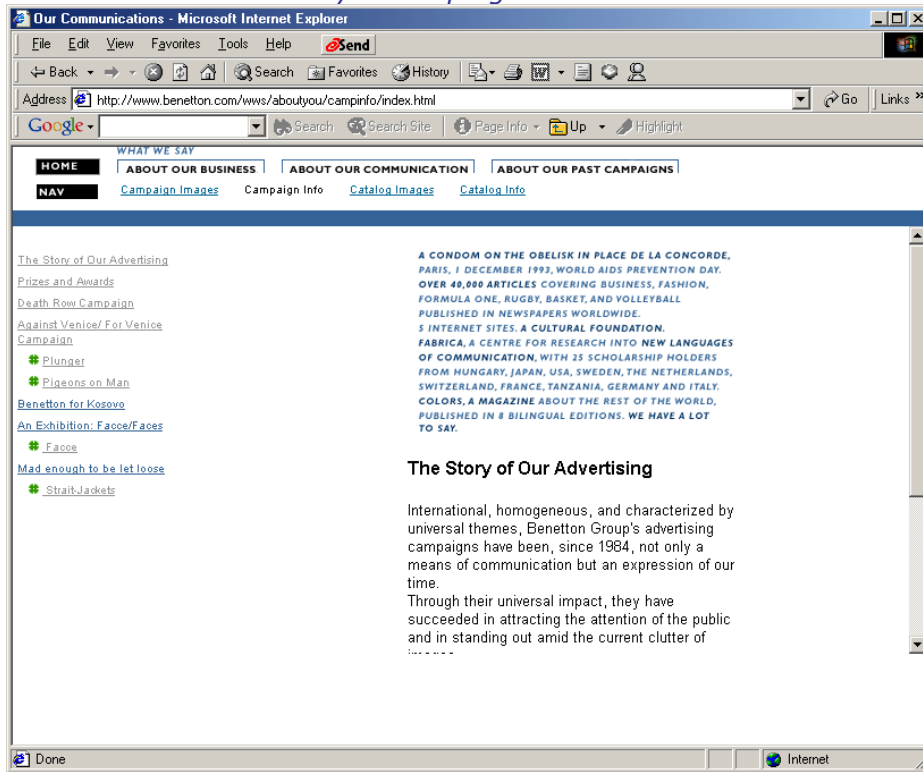
"*I'm not sure what* past campaigns *is. Campaign info? Oh, ad campaign… a* condom on the obelisk…. *What the hell is this? This makes no sense.*"

The SeeItFirst corporate brochure had content that didn't say much and wasn't very attractive to people.

SeeItFirst> Corporate Brochure
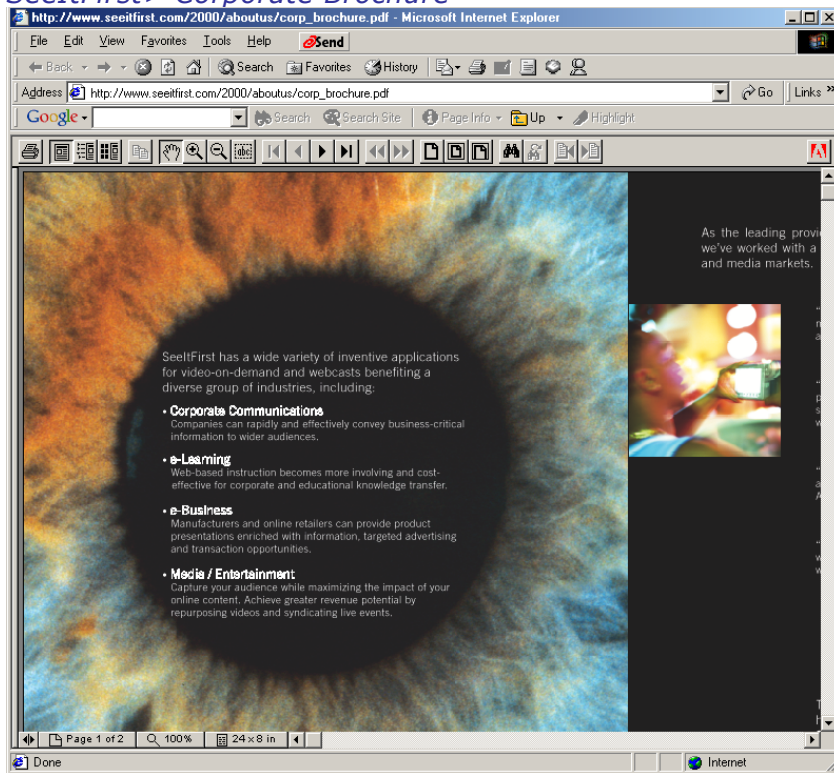
"This is awful. How can I read this? Width is weird. All weird colors and ugly."
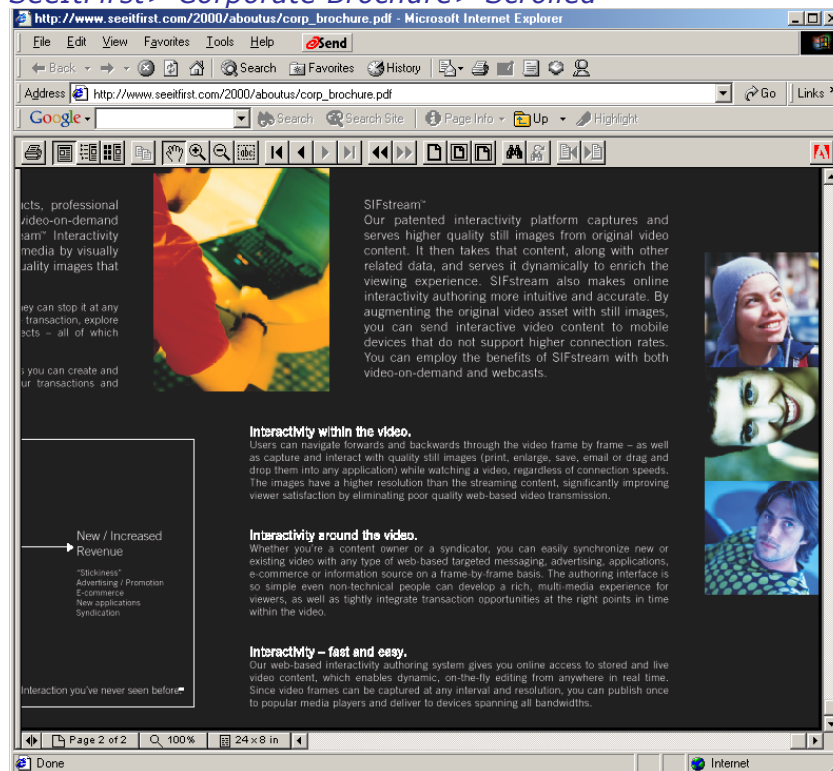
> *"Ha ha, it's interactive. I know that much. Silly graphics. There's that woman with the typewriter. Yes, yes, yes. God, they say the same thing 50 times over. This is heinous. I'm going to close it."*

> *"The information was kind of PR blather. Hard to cut through this 'interactive this, interactive that.' Make the information concise and interesting. Otherwise it's insulting and makes the company look like they don't care about people's time."*

On the Nokia site, when looking for information about the environment and community, a user clicked the *Environment* link on the homepage.

> *"This is annoying. What does this have to do with the environment?* Product performance *is not relevant and I won't be inclined to click on them. I want to see something great right away. You want to feel like you got something right away."*

As she looked further, she became exasperated.

> *"This has nothing to do with the environment. I want to know how they are protecting trees or saving seals. This is the usual junk:* Comply to laws, *well they should;* Respect human rights, *doesn't tell me how;* Child labor*, has nothing to do with the environment… I am pretty sure this site will not give me any more information. I'll have to*

call. Annoying. I am in the Environment *category, everything they give me should be about the environment."*

On the BMW site, the writing is very marketing-oriented. One user laughed when he read the words *benchmark for innovative mobility.*

> *"That's funny to me as someone who is sensitive to being marketed to by media in our lives. I have become somewhat immune to these pitches. The more someone testifies to the product the more I think it's a lemon. BMW has a reputation for being a superlative car. That's enough for me. But, they should still do it because maybe most people aren't like me… always good to assert the greatness of your product. It's just the language that is used makes me laugh…. I look at it as a clue as to how marketing wants to tip people. Usually is says more about who they think their market is."*

Another user read a section about how *Mobility is life* on the BMW site and said:

> *"Connected Drive. What does that mean? This is what I call 'too clever by half.' "*

Then she stuck fingers in her mouth as if to gag herself.

On the Philip Morris site, one user clicked the *Working to Make a Difference* link and laughed. He said:

> *"This is really funny. I am very skeptical of this. Interesting that they are not doing anything with the ailments of smoking…. Something like this just looks like they have a certain tax need to fill and they are giving away to get their quota. Funny."*

Information About the Company, Products, and Management

>BE CLEAR ABOUT YOUR PURPOSE AND PRODUCT

On the SeeItFirst site, it took people awhile to figure out what the company does and even longer to figure out how its technology is used. For new companies or those with new or different technology, it is especially important to make their product and purpose painfully obvious up front, using at most three sentences to explain what it does, why it's different, and why it's important. Again, avoid marketing or PR tactics and just give the facts.

> *"I'm kind of just waiting for it to tell me what it is…. At first I thought it was a fashion site from the introduction page."*

> *"This mildly confuses me. Are they streaming video or turning video into a slideshow? Strikes me as odd. Now I am confused about what it is. I want to see the product…. I still don't really know what the product is. I see* Get Product Brochure *link. I don't want that. I just want to know what is SeeItFirst and if can I download it, and what does it cost?"*

>PROVIDE INFORMATION ABOUT CURRENT AND FUTURE PROJECTS

On the Benetton site, a user was trying to look at the Fall/Winter 2001 collection, but it was in a Shockwave file and she couldn't see it on her slow connection. Seeing the current products was important to her, but she couldn't do it.

> *"You know what would be better here would be to have something with a list of all the catalogs and click and get to the catalog—see that actual catalog. Difficult to tell exactly what's going on…. I am not that pleased to only be able to see something from 1999. I have a Shockwave problem so I can't even see it [2001 collection.]"*

On the *Research* section of the Merck site, there is information about published scientific work. However, one journalist noted that it wasn't very impressive because the work is dated.

> *"Wow. That's a lot of stuff, a lot of the stuff that is two years old. There's nothing for 2000."*

>PROVIDE INFORMATION ABOUT SENIOR-LEVEL MANAGERS

Journalists want information about key players at the company, such as their age, position, and background.

> *"I'll go to* Corporate Info *to see who runs the company… see if these are people I know, what sort of background?"*

On the Nokia, Tellme, and Merck sites, users easily got thorough information about the company officers, along with pictures.

Nokia in Brief> Management

Nokia in Brief> Management> CEO

"I think it's helpful. I like it a lot. I think it's great to have the pictures of these people up."

Tellme> Company Info> Management
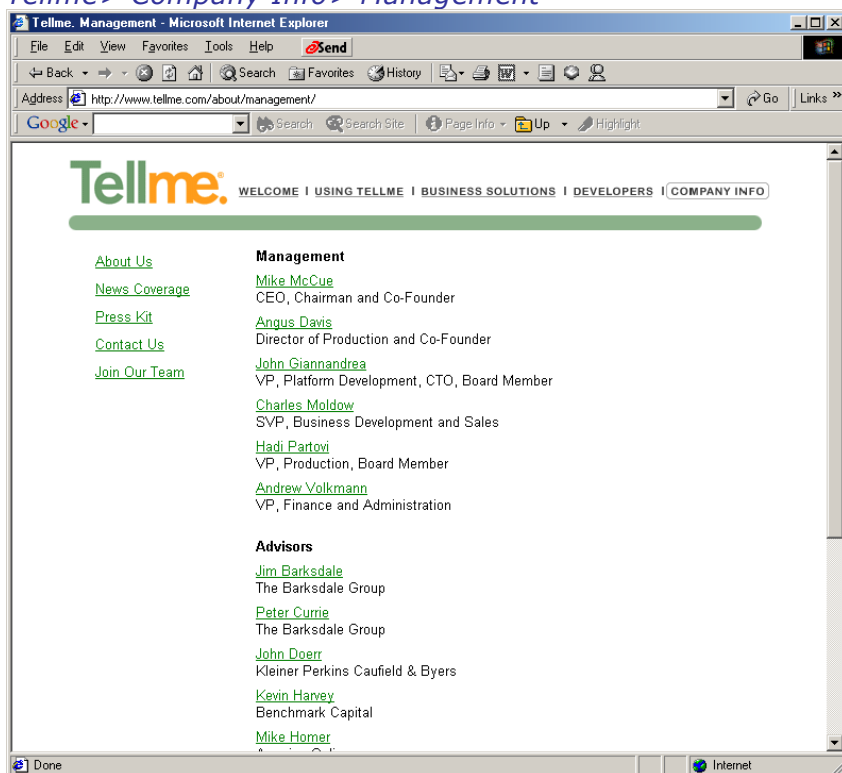
Tellme> Company Info> Management > Mike McCue

About Merck> General Info> Executive Commentary> Biography

*"Here's the management committee and a little about them is there—
[person's] age. Age is good. We need it for the story…. We need to
know where a company is based and what their age is."*

On the SeeItFirst site, users also easily found information about the company
management. Additionally, the manager's names were links; when you clicked on
them, it addressed a personal e-mail to manager. This was well received.

SeeItFirst> About Us> Management
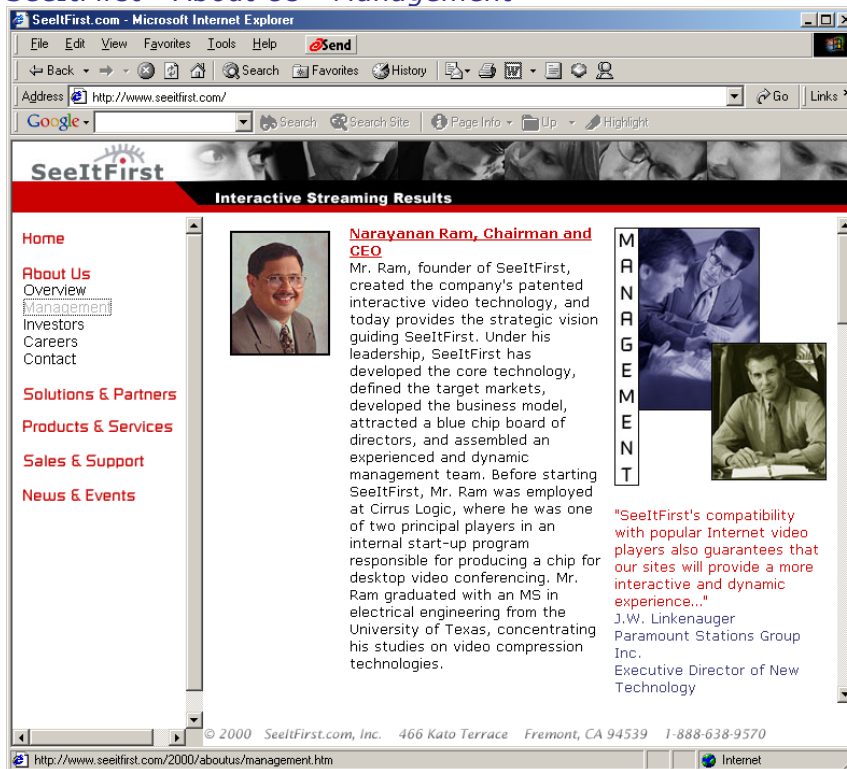
On the Tellme site, when one journalist looked at the management bios, she said:

*"They are pretty nice, good quality. Basically what I want to know,
short and sweet and fine. They should add his age and where he went
to college and where he is from. And, something else that is basic,
like he has 17 children—something interesting about him."*

On the Nokia site, users looked for information about management in countries other
than Finland. They seemed to think that since Nokia is an international company, it
should have managers in other countries and information on them, even it they are
not at the most senior management level.

*"I guess I wanted more U.S. info… These [people] all seem to be
based in Finland. I would want the same info for the U.S. group."*

*"They say they are global, but if they all are Finnish, it doesn't seem
very global to me. Their management is not diverse… the company
probably isn't international."*
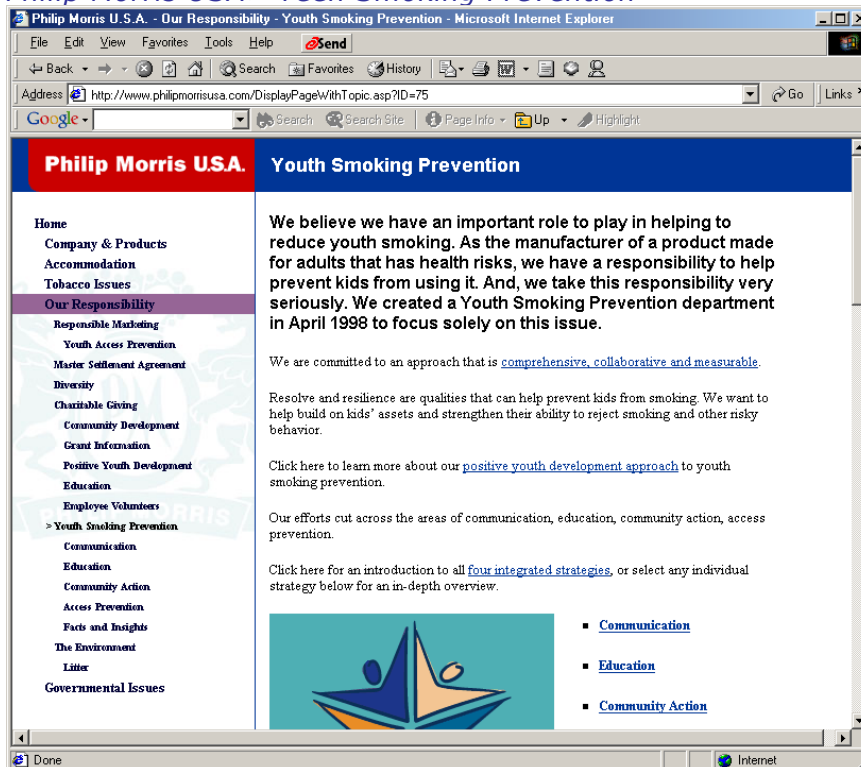
Philanthropy and Social Responsibility

On the Benetton site, after looking for about 10 minutes for information about social responsibility, one journalist said,

> *"I might dig a little more if this was an angle I thought was interesting. At this point, since I didn't find anything—just ads—I would probably then call the company and talk to people there. There are instances when the company is socially responsible, but they are not Web savvy. They don't know to put it on the Web…. I would be much more critical of a computer company."*

On the Philip Morris site, users were unable to find any information about social responsibility. It was there, but was hidden. Making it easier to find would have been an opportunity to give people positive impressions of a company whose name is often linked with causing cancer.

> *"Interesting they are not doing anything with the ailments of smoking."*

Philip Morris USA> Teen Smoking Prevention

On the BMW site, people had trouble finding information about philanthropy.

> *No. I don't see [information about social responsibility] anywhere, and in this case I would assume that it's not here. I would assume any*

corporation would want to include that, even if they don't have a bad reputation in some corners."

On the Fidelity site, a journalist noted that it wasn't enough to list the organizations they donate to. They should also give an idea of the amount of money they donate.

> *"They seem to be supporting hundreds and hundreds of organizations. I can't see each grant though. How much are they supporting? Is it $100 or $10,000 each? I would like to know."*

Organization and Style: The Site and Pages on the Site

>ORGANIZE PAGES: MAKE INFORMATIONEASY TO SCAN

People should be able to easily find what they are looking for, including the right pages and the right text on those pages.

On the Merck site, much of the information journalists wanted was in the *About Merck* section.

> *"It's always* About Merck."
>
> *"The* General Info *page is chunked well. It was in an outline format, very easy to use, especially when it links to others. Can drill down. Everyone understands an outline."*

On the Philip Morris site, one journalist was confused about the method they use to display SEC filings on the site. The text and the length of time it took to bring up the pages made him think he was being directed to a different site.

> *"Click here to continue to* View SEC Filings*. That puzzles me. They are redirecting me? That's odd, that's my first thought. I thought, 'Whoa, what is that all about?' Not sure what happened…. Seems I am still on their site, so why did I have to click twice? I am trying to sort out what kind of info I should be looking for. It seems a bit disturbing because I don't know what the 8-K stands for or what the 10-Q stands for."*

The U.S. Patent Office site has a lot of good information, but it is not well organized. The homepage is full of text that is difficult to scan. People had to look for more than 15 minutes to get basic instructions on how to file a patent. (They found the answer on the *FAQ* page.) People actually had much better luck leaving the site, going to an external search engine, and trying their request there. The search engine, ironically, brought them back to the USPTO site, sometimes exactly to the correct spot.

U.S. PTO> Home (top and scrolled)
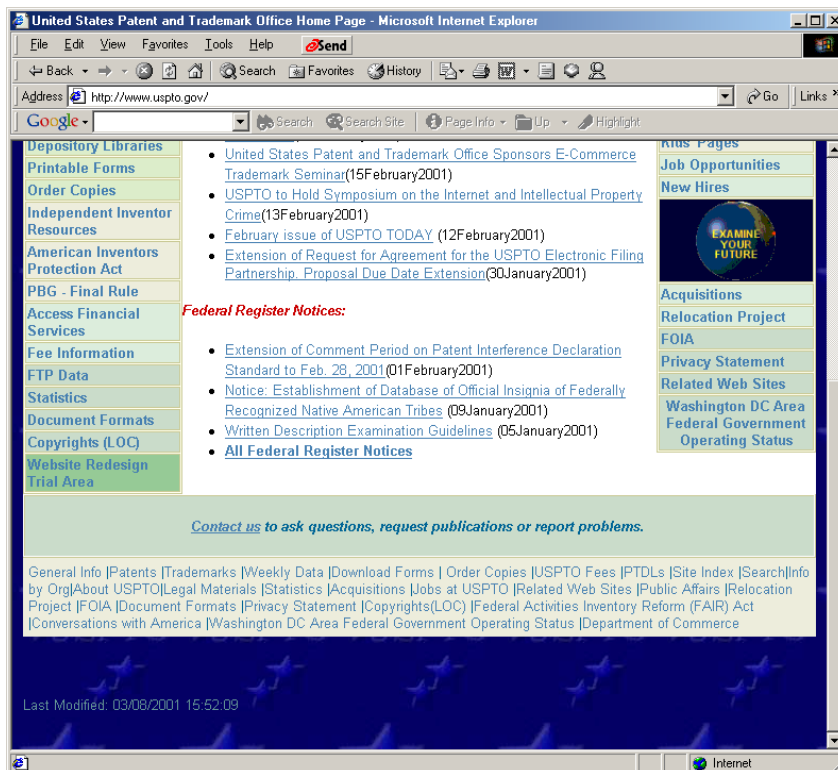
"The website itself might not be easy to navigate. I would be going around this site to get information for the story."

"I find a little bit of trouble with sites that have so much information on each individual page. I like it broken out more…. When you have a site like this that is so convoluted and has so many pages and pages, I would consider it a waste of time to look for some information that might not even be there. There's a time constraint. If you have three different stories you are working on, you don't have time. Some websites give you the information immediately and I just have to call to check the facts. If I can't find something in 10 minutes, I'd call."

The Merck site put their company information on the *FAQ* page, which is not where people expected to find it.

"This is kind of strange. To me, this stuff doesn't belong in a FAQ… these are not questions people ask. The overview stuff should be on a different part of site. It's not where I would have looked for it."

In the Merck annual report, there was a lot of good information, but one user had a lot of trouble dealing with it all.

"One of the things I find is that Acrobat is nice in terms of organizing a page, but this doesn't have a Table of Contents. They should have one…. You should index it…. This [annual report] is real pretty but this is not useful. We use the Web because it is interactive. This is not an interactive document…. Since there is no index, I would go no further. This is a 64-page report. It's not worth my time."

On the Tellme site, the *FAQ* page had a lot of text that was difficult to scan.

"There are way too many questions. Text is tiny and hard to read. The questions are not bolded or anything. I just think this is really badly organized."

The Wal-Mart site does not have a memorable model for navigating the vast amounts of information.

"This site is so huge, you have to expect a bit of work finding stuff. The search engine works for the consumer side of it, but not press. Finding your way around the sections, there's so much and so many articles, you have to look."

On the SeeItFirst site, when the user clicks a major heading in the navigator on the left, it selects the heading and drops open a list or sub-menu. It does not change the display on the right at all. This was mildly confusing; people expected the click to do something in the right frame, too. Also, they expected the section they were in to appear bolded on the navigator.

>DESIGN A CONSISTENT LOOK AND FEEL ACROSS SITE AND SUB-SITES
Users found it disconcerting when a link either brought them to site pages that looked vastly different from the rest or brought them to a different company site all together.

The Wal-Mart site has a link to a separate website about their philanthropy programs. Because the style of the sites was so different, one user thought the link was misdirected, and instinctively clicked the Back button.

> "*Takes you to a whole other URL. I'm on another page. What's this? It looks different. A totally different-looking site.*"

He later went back to the philanthropy site when we gave him that task, but he could have easily skipped by all of this important information.

On the Merck site, the links to different drug products brought up pages that not only looked different from the main Merck site, but from each other as well. This lack of design unity confused users. The product links gave no warning about this change, and the links looked just like those to other parts of the site that shared a common design.

> "*This brought me to a whole different page and different-looking site. What happened? That's weird. That's totally different.*"
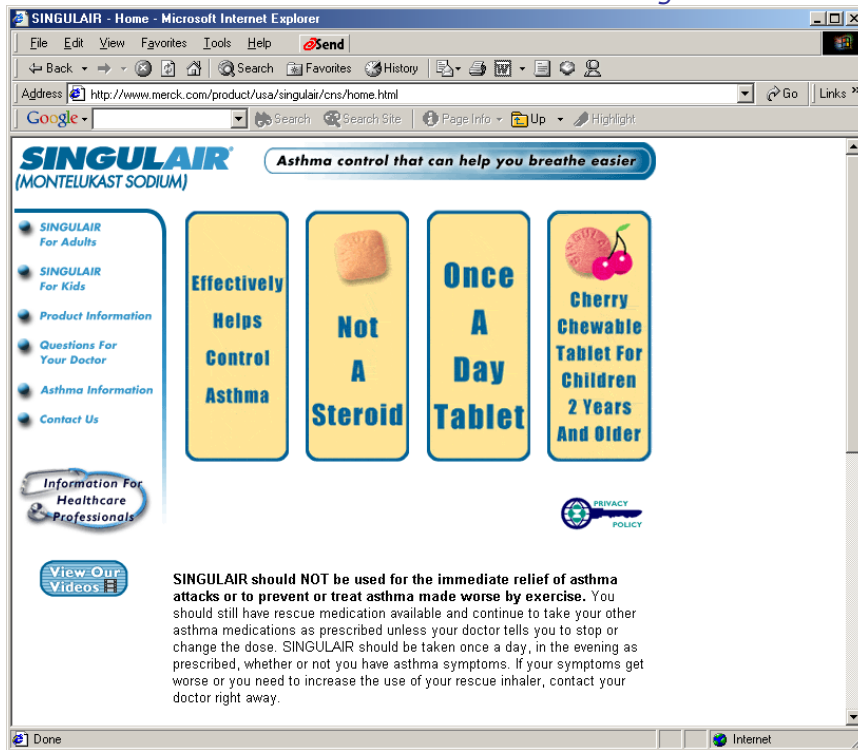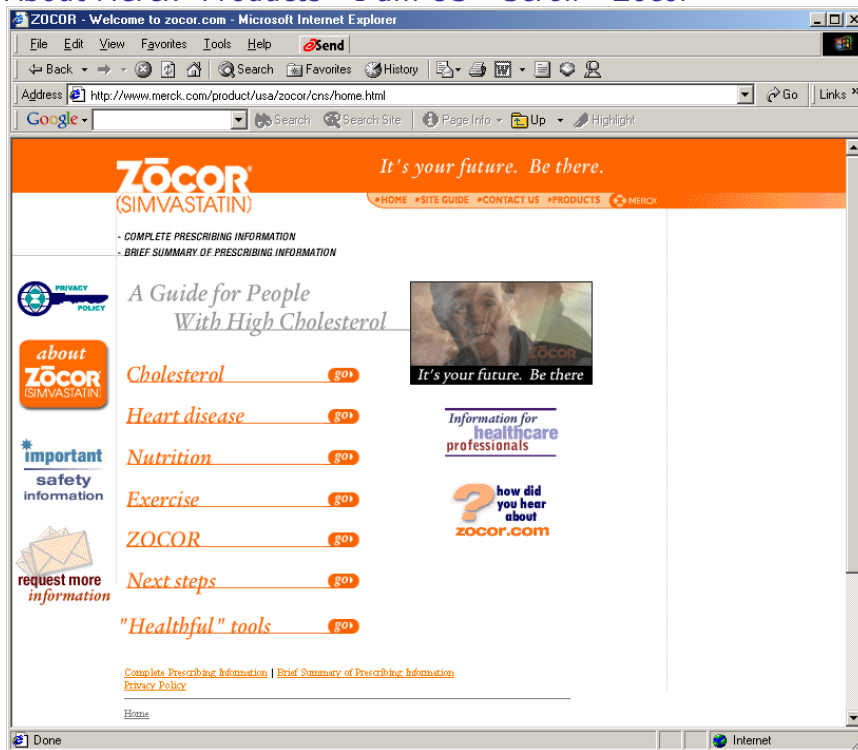
About Merck>Products> I am US
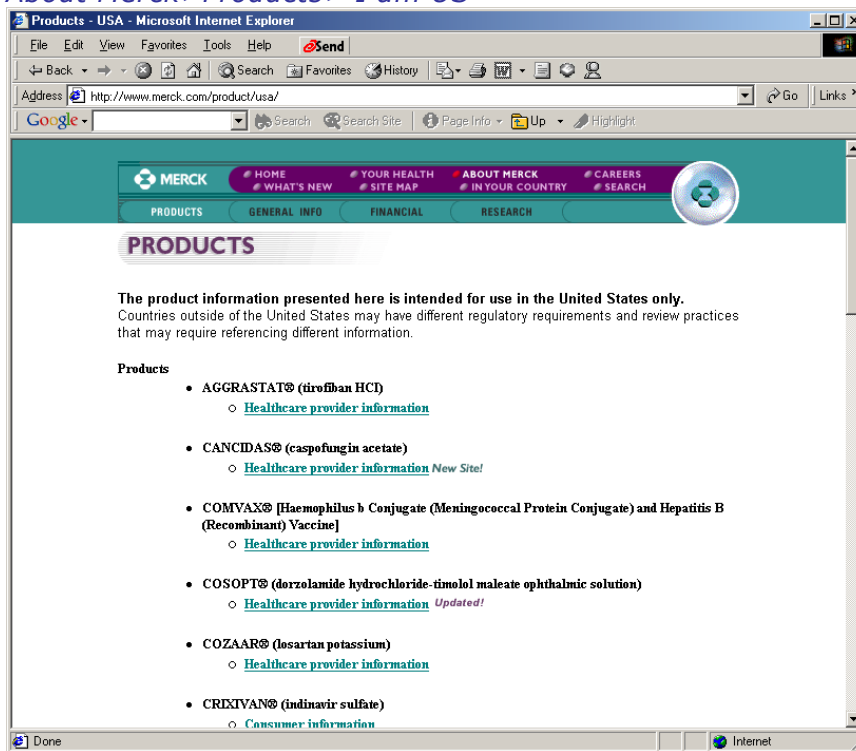
About Merck>Products> I am US> Scroll> Vioxx
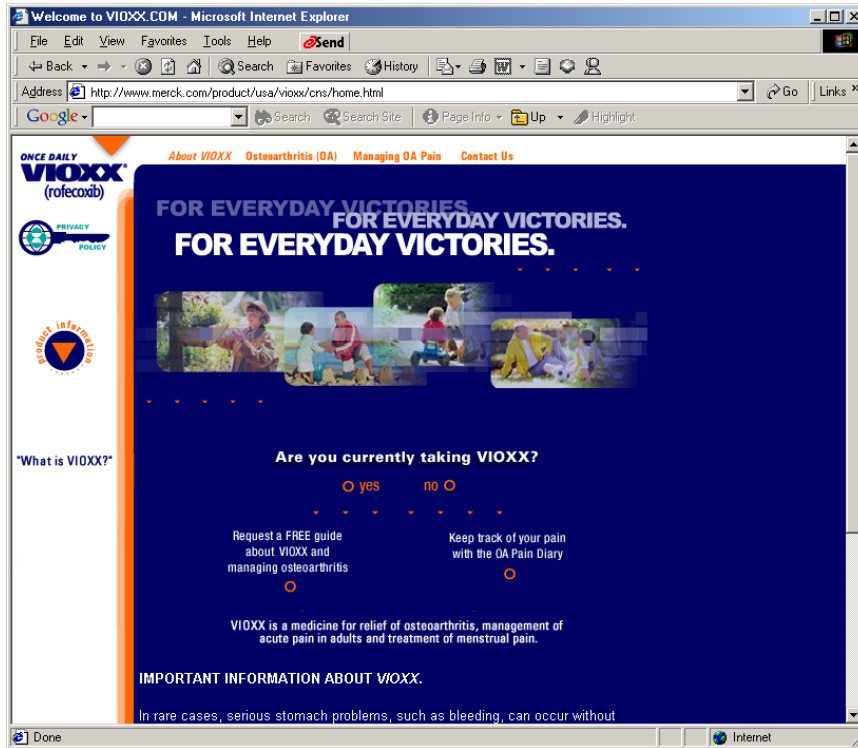
About Merck>Products> I am US> Scroll> Singular

About Merck>Products> I am US> Scroll> Zocor

On the Philip Morris site, the links to their subsidiary sites was disconcerting.

> *"It's fairly jarring. If their message is: We are Kraft, Nabisco, and all these things, I would expect some unity. Even within Philip Morris, I would expect a similar look. Need some consistency so you know you are within the Philip Morris umbrella…. If I didn't know what PM was, I wouldn't really guess by looking at the homepage. I see Kraft and Miller. Their brands seem more identified than the whole company."*

> "News *looks completely different from homepage…. I would think it was a different site. This one is blue. These are just very different designs. This has rollovers the rest of the site doesn't have. The homepage has three columns of text. It looks like they could use a consultant."*

>MAKE THE COMPANY'S ANNUAL REPORT EASY TO FIND
Finding the annual report was easy on the Benetton site.

Benetton> Investor Relations> Latest News> Reports
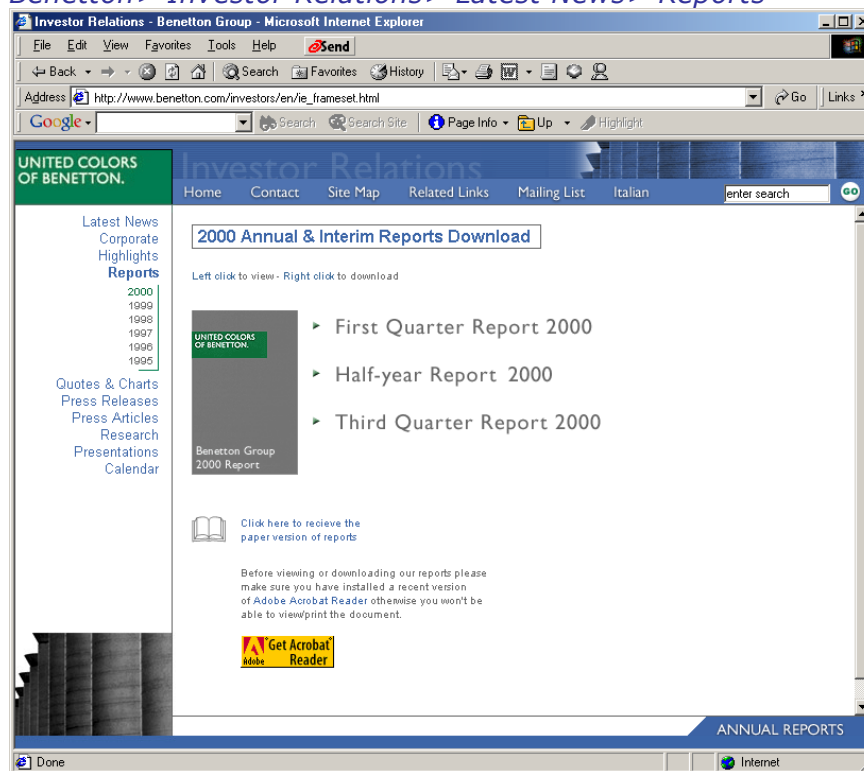
On the BMW site, people did not expect to find financial information in an area called *Fascination* and *Enterprise*. One person commented that this site seems to be targeted toward consumers more than toward journalists. The site does seem designed more for casual browsing and looking at pictures and information about cars. The words chosen for menus and phrases, such as *Fascination* and *Enterprise,* are not very descriptive. They offered little help for journalists trying to do explicit research, such as finding an annual report.

> *"I don't see any [choices on the homepage] that are directly claiming to give the information I seek. I am going to have to root around a little. That seems like a very simple request. If it's offered on this website it should be easy to find."*

> "Fascination. *What does that word mean? Probably a lot of advertising blather."*

> *"What does the* Library *mean? That's just the library of cars. I am already aggravated with this website because I cannot find what I want…. They are coming up with names that don't even mean anything."*

Search

> *"One of the things I like is if there is a really good search function that includes past press releases and it's really easy to find the right PR person in an organization to contact…. Strangely enough, the government sites, you can put something in. You just type* child abuse *into their search blank and along with the other stuff, you get their latest press release and right there at the top you get the PR person's name who wrote the release and then you can call that person. They can put you right in touch."*

>PROVIDE A SEARCH FUNCTION AND MAKE IT EASY TO FIND AND USE
In Nielsen Norman Group's study of e-commerce sites, the most usable search interfaces were those that offered a blank search field, rather than a link, in the upper-right corner of the Web page.[6]

In our studies with journalists, users had some initial difficulty finding the search function on the Tellme site. It's located at the bottom of the pages and they had to scroll to see it. Also, it's unclear if it is searching the whole site, a section of the sites, or the page.

> *"The search on the bottom of the homepage is weird. I'm still not sure where the search is searching, this page or what."*

On the BMW site, users couldn't find a search.

> *"I don't think this site has a search engine. Is that possible? It has a site map but no search engine. If there is one, it's not obvious here."*

On the SeeItFirst site, users could not find any search function.

> *"I don't see a search. I don't think there is one. That's not good."*

In sessions testing the U.S. Patent Office site, users had so much trouble dealing with all the information that they turned to search; in both cases, the search engine was "temporarily disabled."

> *"If I can't even search a site that is so complex, I'd definitely say get someone on the telephone. Search is so basic."*

> *"Annoying."*

>MAKE SEARCH AREAS OBVIOUS
On the Nokia site, a user was looking for information about philanthropy, but the search results were all about job descriptions. The problem? He was in the *Job Descriptions* section of the site and didn't realize it. Another user wanted to search just the press releases, but there was no way to do that.

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[6] *Search: Design Guidelines for E-Commerce User Experience,* Nielsen Norman Group, 2001. See: http://www.nngroup.com/reports/ecommerce/search.html

"I typed environment and a job description comes up. Strange. If I didn't need to do anything special here, I would be gone. It should work. The search is horrible."

"The search is irritating. I want to search just the archive press releases. I can't find a way to do that, though there are choices…. Irritating. I cannot search the whole Nokia site, so I am not even going to use this search."

>INCLUDE COMPANY AND PRESS INFORMATION IN SEARCH RESULTS

On the Wal-Mart sites, the company information was not included in the areas searched. One user searched the entire site looking for information about the company's CEO; most of the search results were books about CEOs that the company sells.

"The entire site search is geared toward consumers. There's a difference between working and shopping. Working, you have to make an effort, but journalists are used to that. It's harder to catch the consumer because they can go to a competitor. If I'm writing about Wal-Mart, I'll give myself the time to find it. Or I'll call them."

On the Philip Morris site search, the user said:

"It didn't help me when I used it. I searched for contact and it didn't provide it. Took me to the same contact site I had been to before."

On the Merck site, a user searched for *media relations* to find a press contact number. It returned information about the human ear.

On the Fidelity sites, the user forgot where he found the site map, and searched for *site map.* He got a programming error that crashed the browser.

"If I was an average user I'd be lost now. It just opened Visual Interdev. I'm probably not going to search for site map again."

"The search function doesn't seem to be working very well. I searched for the CEO and there is no CEO. Searched for chairman and search found a different chairman, the chairman for charitable giving funds at Fidelity. He is not the Chairman for Fidelity. That's Edward Johnson here. I know him now. He's a friend. I do a search on Edward Johnson *and he doesn't even come up in the search results. The search function is not to be trusted here."*

In other studies, we've seen users transfer their conclusions about the quality of the site's search engine to a general assessment of the quality and reliability of the site. A common conclusion? If they can't get their act together on the site's search, the entire site is probably poorly done.

UI Design Elements

>OPENING ADDITIONAL WINDOWS

On the Benetton site, when you click a press release link, it opens the release in another window.

*Benetton> Virtual Press Office> Press Releases> Press 2000> A Release*
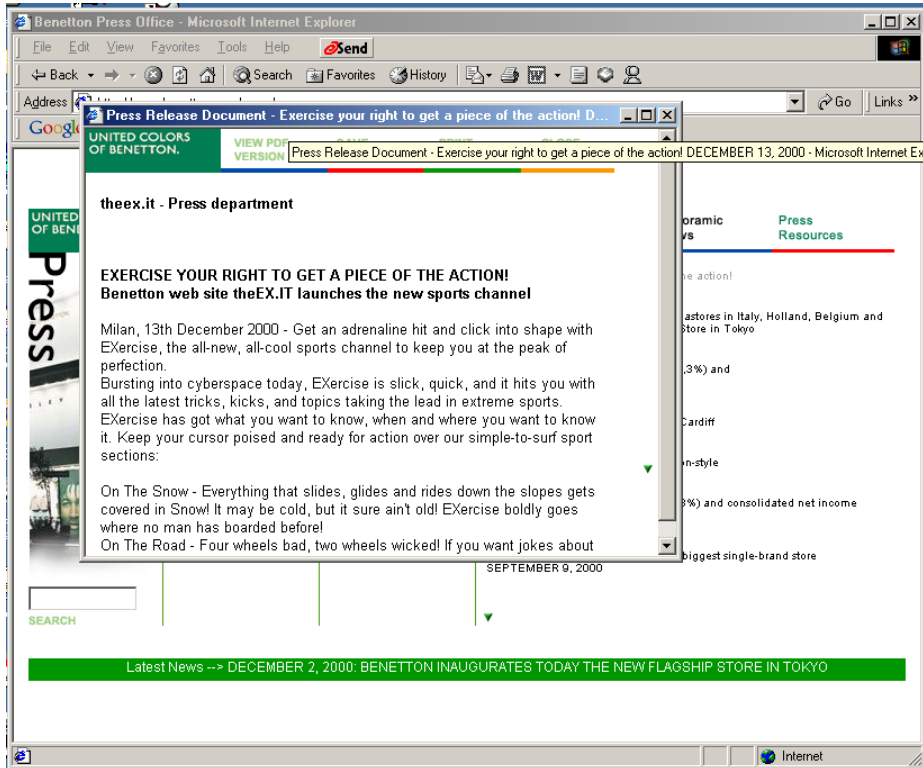
"Whenever I got those pop-up windows, it makes me feel like there isn't any depth: 'I can tell you everything you need to know in a very small area.' "

"I don't like these, when the extra window comes up…. I am running large fonts on my computer which screws up a lot of sites, especially in these."

On the SeeItFirst site, you can see a product demo. But, the video image is only a small part of the secondary window that opens. People wanted to expand the video window.

SeeItFirst> Travel With Us
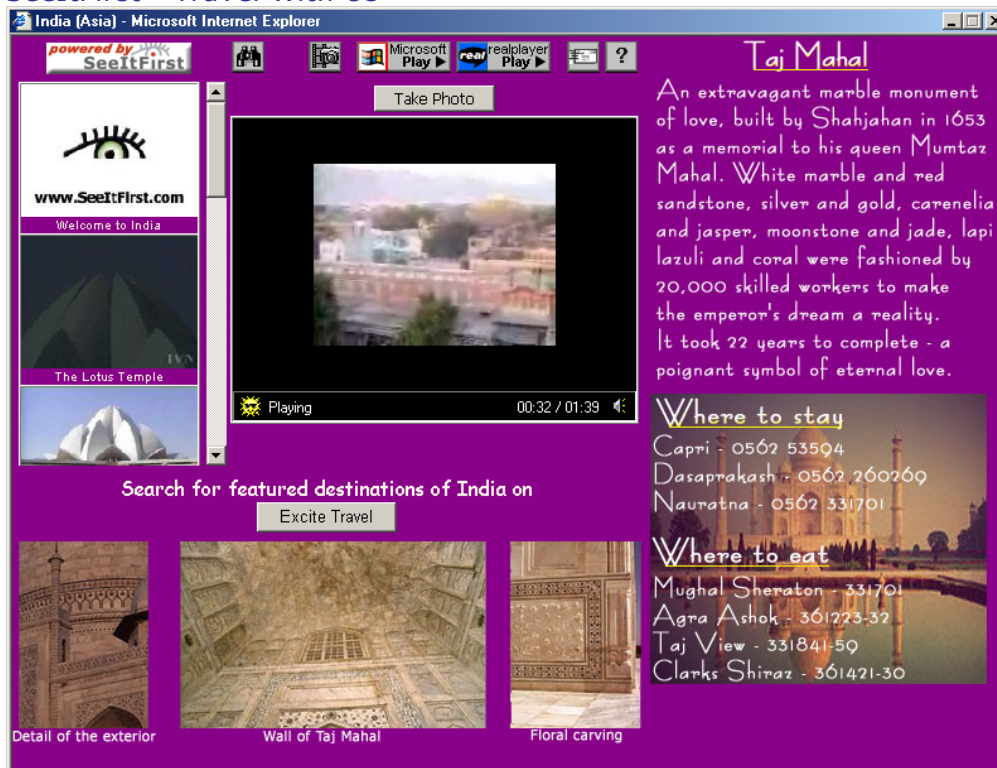
> *"This is weird, you cannot maximize the window. It bugs me. It should resize, even if it's blank at the bottom. The other windows behind it are distracting. If I'm trying to have this immersing experience in India, or a house for sale in Westchester County, I should be immersed."*

>USE STANDARD SCROLLBARS

When the press release opens in the second window on the Benetton site, only a small part of it is visible, so you need to scroll. If you try to scroll with the window's scrollbar, it doesn't work. It just stops. To scroll, you have to use green arrow widgets created for this particular site.

Benetton> Virtual Press Office> Press Releases> Press 2000> A Release> Scrolled
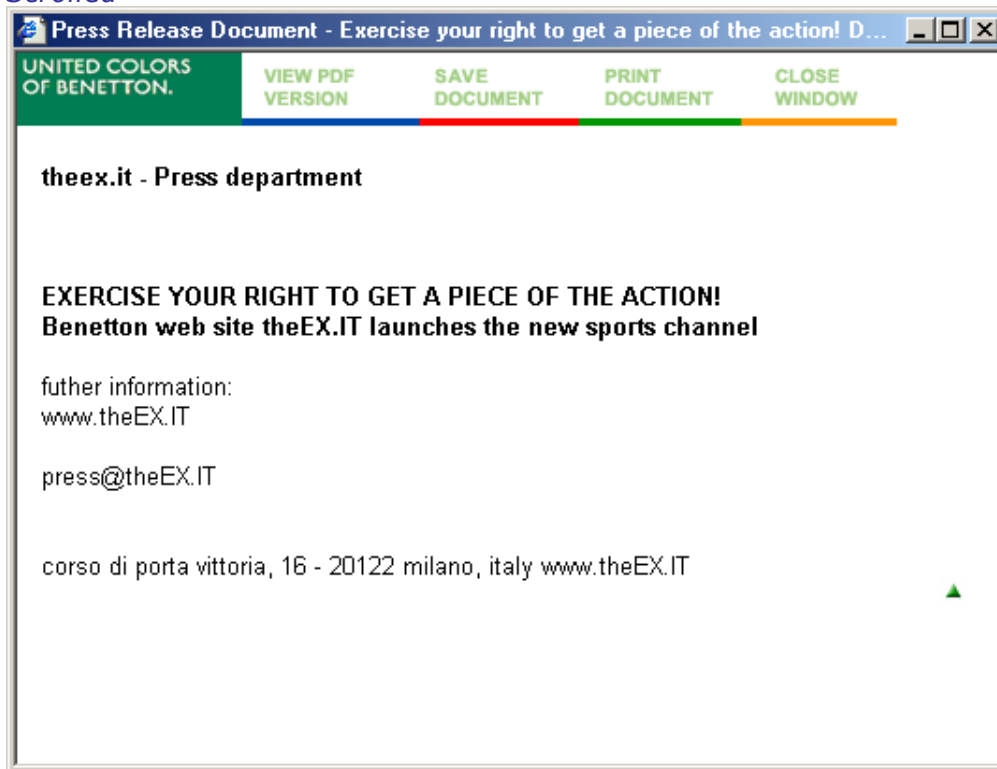
Graphics and Images

>PROVIDE PRODUCT PICTURES AND DOWNLOADABLE IMAGES

One journalist commented:

> *"Half the battle here is getting the art to run with the story. I think we would even pay a subscription for it. It would be great for headshots and production shots…. One story we did, they sent us slides and they were good but we had to scan them in. It would be nice if the website had them online."*

On the BMW site, one journalist commented that it was very helpful to see the pictures of the company's cars.

> *"Some companies have in the press room… photos of the products—high-resolution ones that we can use. We do use them, like for product reviews."*

> *"I think it's a good idea to show these repeating images. Gives you a good idea of the products. They are nice-looking cars. From a journalistic standpoint, we would have to describe the cars…. Pretty sleek-looking in these pictures."*

>DO NOT INCLUDE SUPERFLUOUS GRAPHICS

Generally, users were annoyed by graphics that were unrelated to text, too glitzy, or took too long to load. On several occasions, such images frustrated users or made them angry, or made them laugh at the site.

On the U.S. Patent Office site, it appears as though the graphics were added just because they had them. Once, the graphics were so unrelated to the text, it actually made one user laugh.

U.S. PTO> 1999 Annual Report> Patents> Toast
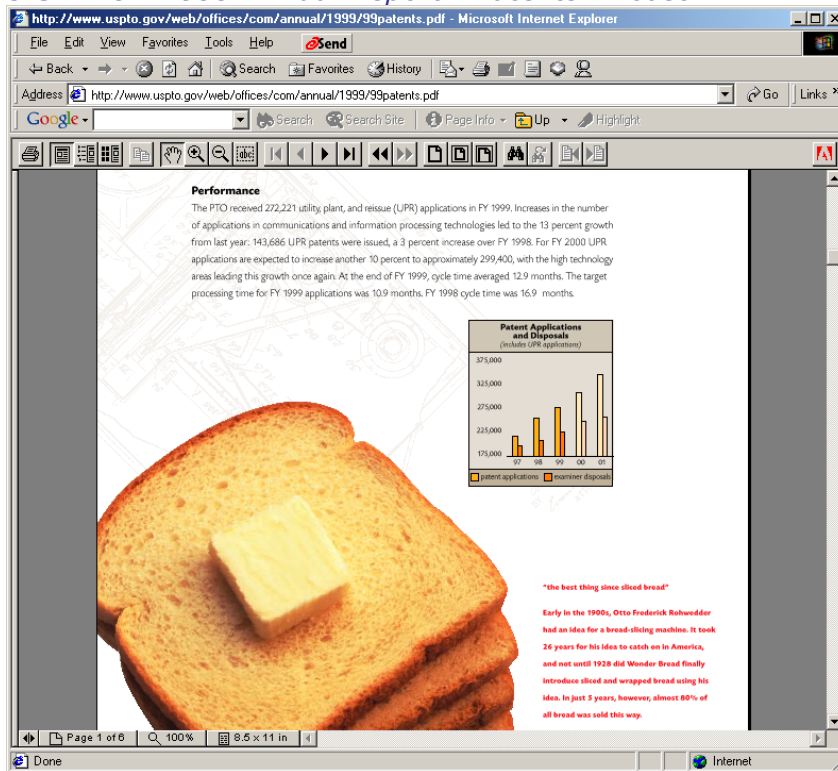
"Why do you suppose there is a picture of a piece of toast here?

On the Benetton site, users were confused by many of the pictures, which seemed to be completely unrelated to the clothing products.

Benetton> What We Say> Campaign Info> Plunger

"Why a plunger? Because it's weird? Just for fun? I don't really know what that is. A plunger… I guess they are socially responsible, but I still don't understand the plunger."

On the BMW site, the many graphics seemed to make the load time very slow. Journalists did not appreciate the graphics, except for the full pictures of cars, because they didn't give any real information. Waiting for superfluous graphics made people angry.

BMW> Home
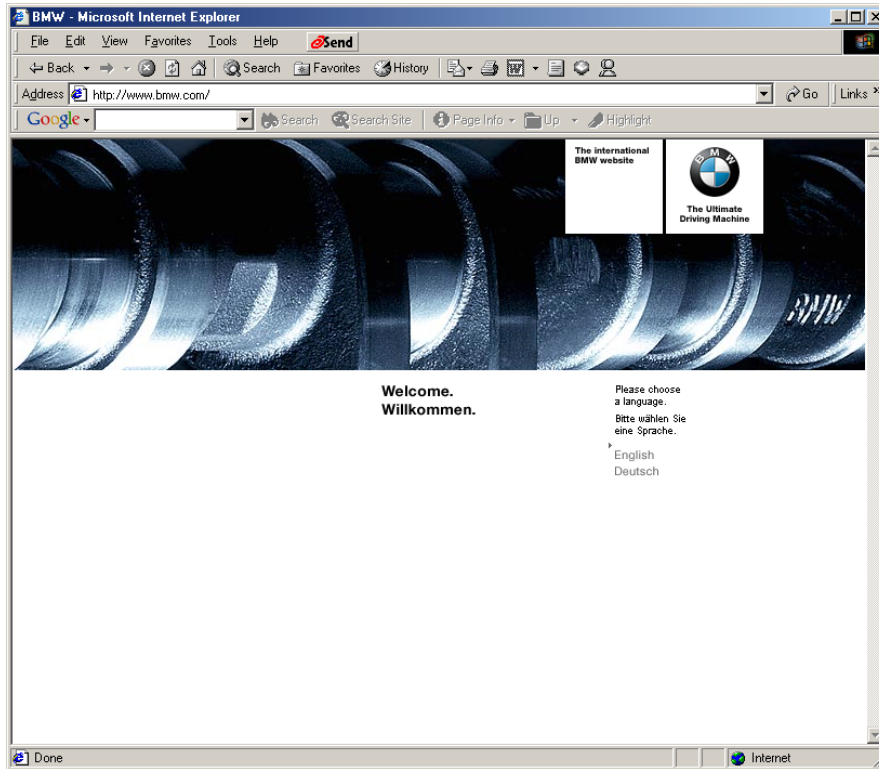
"This [homepage] is terrible. It looks like a bunch of dog dishes. What is that? A wheel. It's God awful. Text is a little small. Is this going to appeal to motor heads? Why can't you ever see the car? I only see bits and pieces of cars. Why does this load so slowly?"

"You get the feeling that some 20-year old was given all this money and they were told to make slick. They made it unusable. It doesn't even look cool. It looks silly. Like a good-looking watch when you can't read the numbers. There is something strangely out of sync. You think of people who have BMW's as people who are cerebral, logical. But the website is saying: 'Look how cool we are.' If you're having a mid-life crisis, this is the place to go."

On the Merck site, people said that the graphics were useless.

Merck> Corporate Philanthropy Report

Partnerships for tomorrow
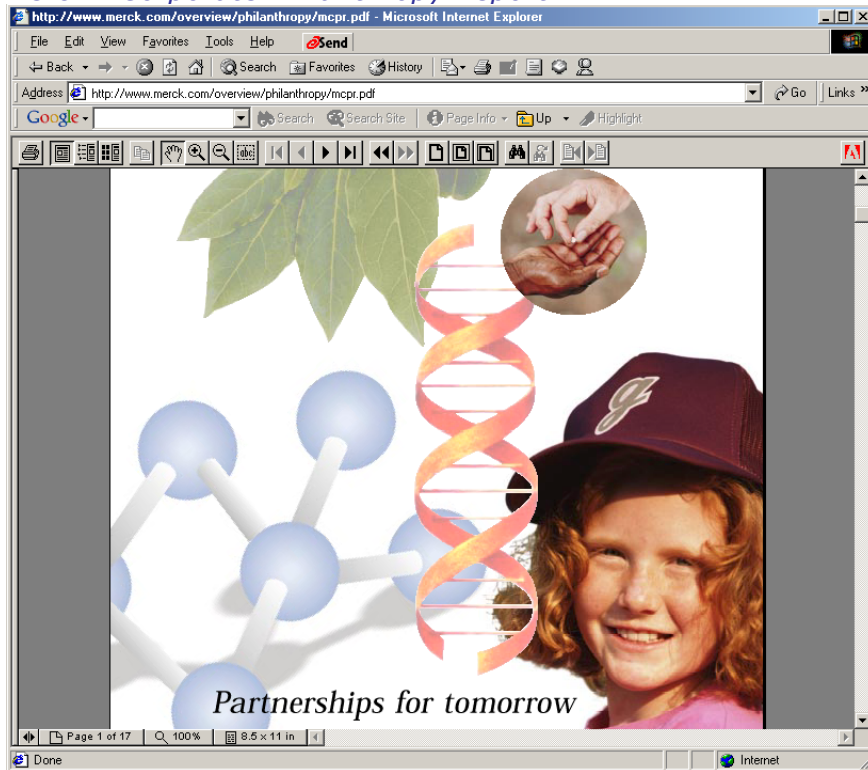
 "This stock art is not helpful."

Pictures in the Philip Morris annual report were unnecessary and somewhat annoying to users.

Philip Morris> Annual Report>

> *"As a journalist I am pretty much indifferent to the pictures. I would prefer them to have a printable form of the report and another version with fancy PDF's. If I print this is will take a long time and memory. I'd prefer a printer-friendly format. [Most annual reports] have a summary, with the highlights from the report. But they don't have one."*

Journalists suspected that Wal-Mart is trying to convey happy employees and a fun store experience. Nonetheless, they still joked about the pictures on the site.

Wal-Mart> Investor Relations

"That's hokey. But I guess that's what they want to portray. To me, it's geeky. Some people really like this kind of stuff."

Movement, Multimedia, Movies, and PDF Files

>DO NOT INCLUDE POINTLESS DEMOS OR MOVIES ON THE HOMEPAGE OR FIRST PRESS PAGE

Journalists generally complained about multimedia demos, Flash demos, and the like. They never wanted to wait for a demo to play before they could proceed. If the saw a *skip* button, they clicked it. They never wanted to download any software to read information. A journalist with a very slow Internet connection commented:

> *"I get kicked off those Flash sites with alarming frequency, or I just can't get on."*

The Benetton site showed a Flash demo on the homepage and when entering the press area. People found this very annoying. They especially disliked the fact that the demos played every time they entered the site. When one user first launched the site, he said:

> *"I hate these things Flash intros."*

When the demo played on the third time he clicked into the press area, he winced, then said:

> *"The annoying intro. Again. If you are going to do that, you only need it once. Or cookie so it's once a day…. This whole site so far feels to me like a designer went wild and had fun without a lot of usability. It's certainly not an easy site. It's good looking."*

Another said:

> *"The flashing things and things that need special software to run are irritating…. I think if you're doing something specifically for journalists, it should look good, and stylish writing is important. I hate that Shockwave or anything that takes too long to load or that I have to download. I don't want to have to start downloading stuff just to see what Benetton has to say. I just want the info, especially when it comes to just the contact numbers and stuff. Anyone doing an article has to contact the company… all that other stuff doesn't make much of a difference."*

When entering the press area, the same user said:

> *"Again has some Shockwave thing on it. Nothing is happening so that's not good."*

>DO NOT HAVE CONSTANT MOVEMENT ON THE HOMEPAGE

On the SeeItFirst site, people were startled by and then annoyed by the fashion shoot multimedia demo that launched on the homepage. Also, the constant scrolling of the *Get Interactive Here* area was distracting. People seemed annoyed by it some times, and other times they just ignored it. Although we generally recommend that sites skip these demos altogether, this company is a bit of a special case since the interactive view is actually the product they sell. As many studies have shown, however, the scrolling window did not make users try the technology. And, even if

they wanted to, clicking on the actual picture does nothing; users must click precisely on the words in the link. This is not easy to do as they are scrolling by. Users have to be fast and precise. In other words, they have to work for it.

The SeeItFirst site has a whole section for *Products and Services.* People looked there when they were trying to figure out what the product is and does. This would be a good place for the product demos. While visiting this site, one user said:

> *"The moving on the bottom left is annoying."*

About 40 minutes later, he said:

> *"The moving thing on the left is really getting on my nerves. I have no greater inclination to click on it now that I did ½ hour ago."*

Another user said:

> *"Generally I don't care for Flash sites that give no other option. I at least like to have the option to have the HTML. [My computer] just crashed…. I never ever want to hear music on a website. Incidental music on a website is unnecessary and irritating. Takes forever to load and I have to figure out how switch it off."*

>MAKE ANY USE OF MOVIES SEAMLESS AND SIMPLE
On the BMW site, some of the financial information is in a QuickTime movie. A user got a message about switching him to QuickTime Pro.

> *"That's disconcerting to me. Ah. That's not good. It made me quit my entire program. I don't know why I was given a streaming program in the first place. I would give up. That annoys me to no end. In most cases, no, I would abandon ship. In general, I think streaming video is a bad idea. Unless it tells me in advance that I am getting [software downloads], I don't want it. I am unsure of why it made me quit in the first place. Now that stuff just irritates me. I didn't ask for any streaming and I certainly didn't want to add anything to my hard drive."*

On the Fidelity site, one user looked at the company timeline. While he liked the information about the company, he wanted to see the information all at once and to be able to print it.

Fidelity> Inside Fidelity> Timeline
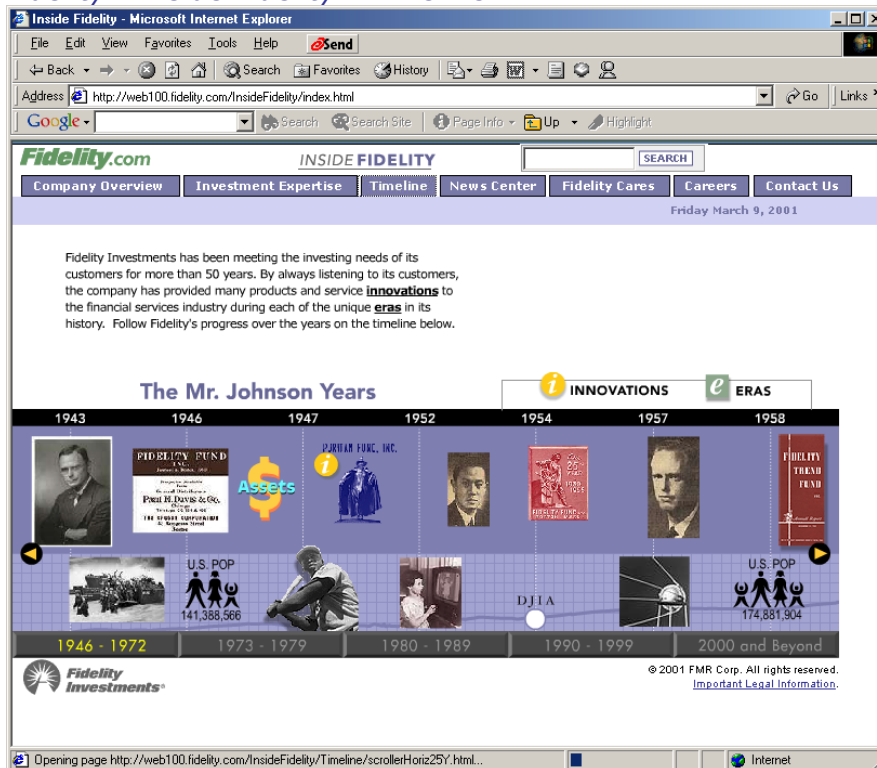
> *"I do not like that there is no text until I put my mouse on the pictures. I don't like this because I would have to take notes. I like the sort of historical overview and I would like to see some of this information in a printable form."*

>PROVIDE ALL IMPORTANT INFORMATION ON WEB PAGES, AND LARGE REPORTS IN PDF FILES
Journalists consistently said they would print important information, such as the annual report. Users with fast computers and high-speed network connections were less bothered reading PDF files online. But everyone said they prefer to read information on standard Web pages, and print PDF files.

> *"I don't mind PDF files that much. I like being able to see HTML. Printing PDF is better."*

> *"I think downloading PDF things is not so cool. It's a pain. I would just like to see the things on the pages."*

> *"I like to get things in PDF format. It's cleaner and I don't have to format it when I print and reference it when going on an interview. That's good for that."*

While placement of and navigation to Philip Morris's basic financial information could be better, they do have all this important data on Web pages, which is excellent. They also have more specific information in the annual report.

Philip Morris> Investor and Corporate Info> Investor Relations

Benetton also offers pages with basic financial information, which is helpful.

Benetton> Investor Relations> Latest News> Quotes and Charts

Merck provides financial information in various places, in addition to the annual report.

Merck> About Merck> Financial

About Merck> General Information> FAQ> IV. Financial Information

"This is good—financial info. They don't make you sort through the annual report to get the bottom line. The things people want to know quickly are going to be up here."

The Philip Morris site SEC filings pages are very difficult to read online, but they do offer a *Print Friendly Format* button.

Philip Morris> SEC Filings> View Print Friendly
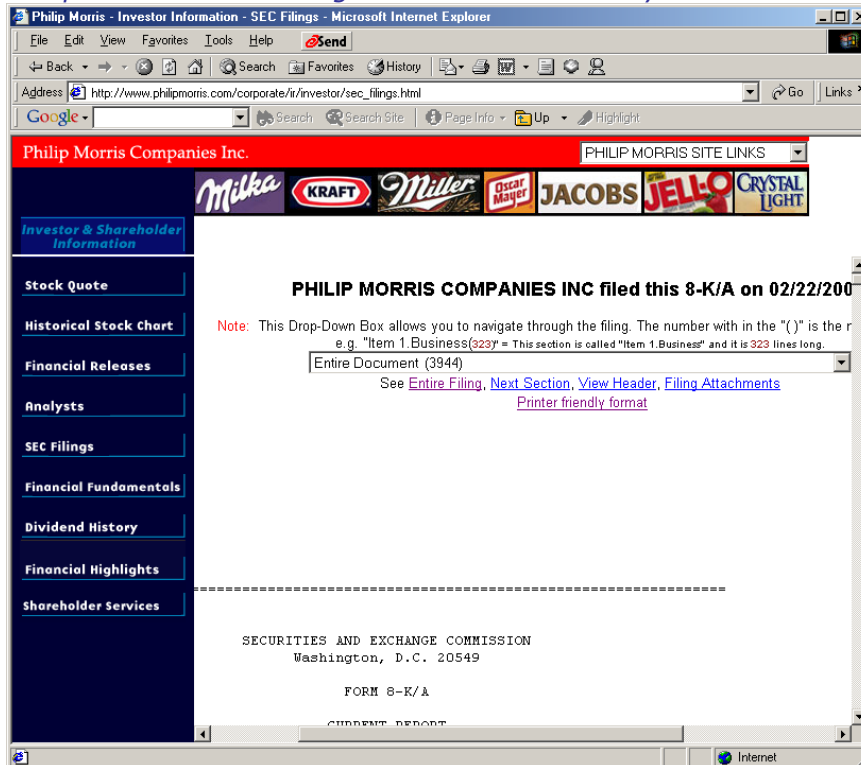
"If I am not sure, but I can maybe use something for an article, I print it and read it on my couch. For me, here it is impossible to read. They have only transferred the SEC document to the Web. But here is a printer-friendly link, so I could print it out if I want to."

Users appreciated fast-loading pages with white backgrounds, like several on the Benetton site.

"It comes up quickly and there are not a lot of graphics that take a lot of time to load. White background is nice. I hate those colored backgrounds, especially dark. I like to print out and those print horribly…. I like that there are only two paragraphs of info and it's in subsections."

On the Wal-Mart site, like most sites, the annual report is a PDF file. People using Macintoshes commented that PDF files are frequently problematic for them to view.

"This doesn't work well with Macs. It never seems to launch Acrobat reader. [Sigh.] This never works. I download something and it can't find the application. I would wait until I get home and read it there

*because my reader works there. I might try to open through Word if
it's a Word doc."*

On the BMW site, some of the news and information, *Knowledge in Detail,* is only
accessible in .PDF format. When a user clicked the link, she got a message telling
her to download Adobe Acrobat.

*"If they want us to know what they are doing, and if there is a way to
get to these articles, why would I have to download this software to
read them? I don't want to."*

Numbers and International Formats

>WRITE DATES IN AN INTERNATIONAL FORMAT

As we noted above, European and American date formats are different. This can be confusing. Worse yet, if users interpret the date incorrectly, the information can appear stale.

On the BMW site, the most recent press release was dated "9.1.01." A U.S. journalist, testing the site in January, thought this was a September press release because of the date format.

> *"The last press release is from September. That's not good."*

Similarly, on the Tellme site, one of the Danish journalists saw the most recent press release dated: 10-03-2000, which was October 3, 2000. He said:

> *"The latest is March this year. That's a long time ago. Nothing has been happening for over six months? They don't list them first. They list them weird. Oh wait—do you write month first? Then day? It's a European thing."*

>WRITE CURRENCY IN AN INTERNATIONAL FORMAT

On the Tellme site, there was a reference to *$60 million.* On the Philip Morris site, earnings were also written in this format. A few of the Danish journalists were not sure how large that number actually was, and wanted to see it written with the zeros.

> *"That's 13.490 billion dollars, I think. It says $13,490 and annotated 'in millions.' I'm not sure. I am always unclear what you do in English, if this is millions or billions."*

> *"I need to see the zeros. Danish, we have thousand, millions, another million, then billion."*

On the Nokia site, the financial information was reported in Euros. A journalist in the U.S. complained:

> *"Looks like it's not in U.S. dollars. It's in Euros, which is a problem. I need to go get someone to covert for me. This is a Finnish company but it is in English and they mean it to be read by me here. This is a problem."*

Performance

In the February 2001 Nielsen Norman Group survey of Fortune 50 Company websites, we tested how long it takes corporate homepages to load using a 56KB analog modem. The average load time was 97 seconds. According to our e-commerce study, the recommended load time is 10 seconds.[1]

A few of the sites that we asked journalists to evaluate took some time to load. For example, on the Merck site, loading the corporate philanthropy report took an unusually long time.

> *"They could improve their server. Jeesh. This is too slow."*

On the BMW site, the 1999 annual report took an extremely long time to load. It was not a PDF file, but it was a QuicktimePro file.

> *"Slow… still coming up… panorama, 360 degree view. What am I, Gettysburg? A little Theater in the Round here? Whatever this is, it's taking a long time to come up."*

Other pages with graphics on the BMW site also took a long time to load.

> *"This doesn't load fast enough. Too slow. I have cable, so why is this taking so long to load?"*

>FIX BUGS

On the SeeItFirst site, the text in the left-hand navigator first appears overlapping and jumbled, then fixes itself. This occurs while the page is loading, and is the first impression of the site. Users noticed it and commented on it. Also, they seemed to care more about this glitch because the company is a technology company.

SeeItFirst> Home
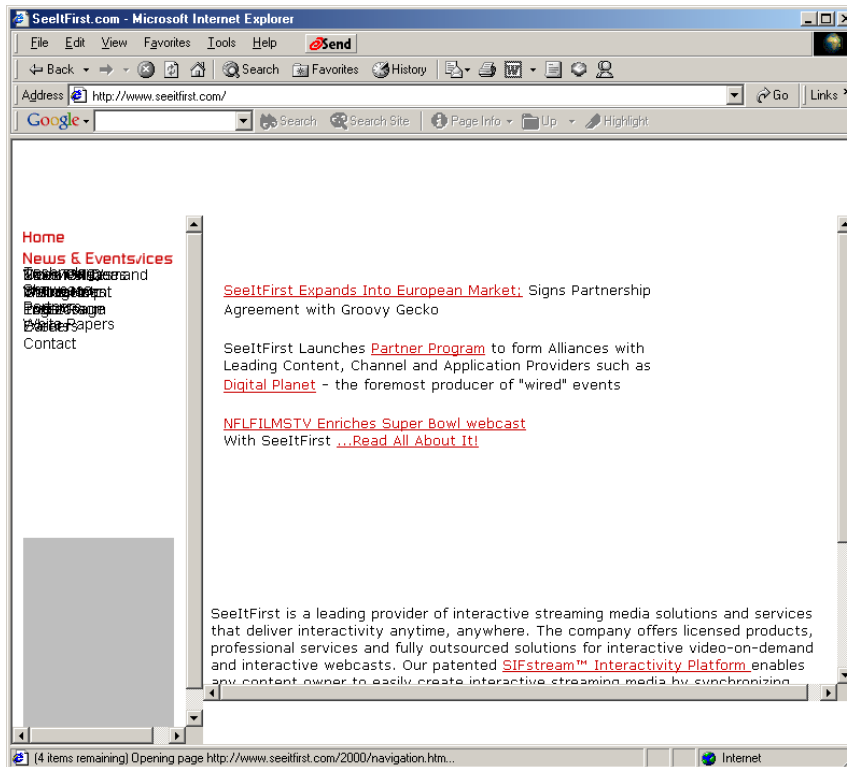
"Did you see that? It was all messed up."

"This is all screwed up here. The pictures overlap. If this is a technology company, it looks bad. That is supposed to be their business. So right away I don't have much faith in them."

Philip Morris's financial information was difficult to deal with because of the large PDF files, and especially because the annual report's Table of Contents did not match the actual page numbers.

Philip Morris> Annual Report> TOC
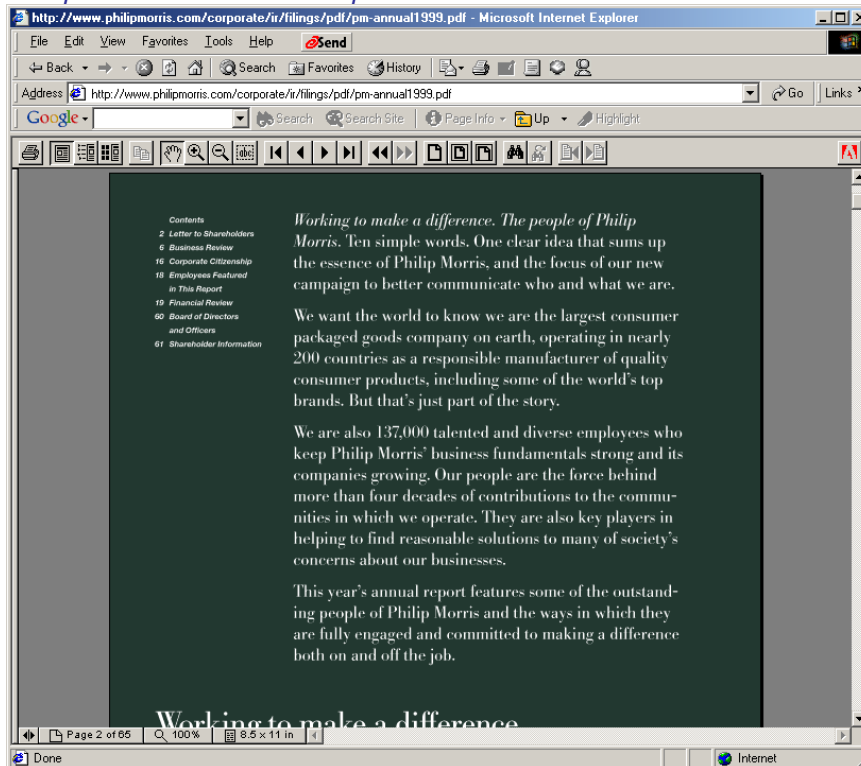
> *"I am trying to find the financial overview. It said it was on page 19. I am on page 19. I see nothing. [Laughs.] What? It seems they have not done their work properly."*

People were very hard on Nokia when they encountered a broken link on the homepage.

> *"It's not very trustworthy if you say you are the forefront of technology and there are broken links on the homepage. What is on the homepage seems trustworthy, but broken links make it less trustworthy. If you stay and read about this highly technical company and they can't have a homepage that works perfectly, it scratches in the credibility."*

When and Why Journalists Leave Sites

At some point in every session, each journalist said they would call the company, specifically the PR department, either to get information they could not find on the website or to confirm information they did find.

> *"I would always call to get a live person. With e-mail, some people don't read it immediately."*

At least once in every session, journalists either left sites or said they wanted to leave them when they couldn't find information or they got frustrated with the interface.

At least once in every session, journalists left the company's website and turned to another Web source (usually a search engine; sometimes another newspaper or magazine) to find information about a company. Journalists always plan to leave your site to do some research about your company. They need outside sources. The more you can direct them to those sources, such as news articles, the better.

> *"It's often best to get the information from other places besides the company you are looking for."*

> *"I look for reviews of the products. Follow the links to magazines then start. I expect the magazine to have other reviews of this or similar products… news about the company."*

The following table describes when users left the sites or said that they wanted to leave the sites during our test sessions.

	LEFT THE SITE OR WANTED TO LEAVE THE SITE

Benetton (4 times)	**Financials**
	    "This wasn't the easiest in the world but it wasn't hard. Also, I'd go to financial sites now, too."
	Beginning
	    To see what others say: "I would go to Google and click some other articles to find out about the company. What others are saying."
	    Wanted other reviews, and was annoyed by: the Flash intro, superfluous information, page layout, strange scroll UI for press releases. Went to Google.
	View Product (Fall Collection)
	    Got Shockwave message and said, "I still can't see it. At this point I would call the PR person. Rather than try to download the Shockwave and keep clicking, I would print this page then look at the main pages for the collections. Get the PR person to Fed Ex me the catalogs. I don't want to have to print a million pages in color."

BMW (6 times)	**Financials**
	    "This kind of hunt and peck thing is what I don't like and what keeps me off the Internet. I think it's a quick thing and then it makes me waste half an hour. Half the time I will just pick up the phone and ask them to call me. I would ask them to mail it to me. I'd rather wait two weeks than spend half an hour here." Laughed.
	    Movie file crashed user's computer: "I am so out of there. I pick up the phone and I call them and ask for a 1999 annual report. I get too irritated."
	    Could not find information: "I am already aggravated with this website because I cannot find what I want. I would leave this website." Went to Lexis-Nexis.
	Finding What BMW Stands for
	    Could not find financial information on the site, so user wanted to look in Lexis-Nexis. She thought she needed the company's full name to do this, so she went back to bmw.com to find out

	what BMW stands for. "This is stupid. There is no mention of the name of their company. They are not willing to divulge that. I would just call the PR person now if I could find that." **PR Contact** Could not find information. "I would look in the Yellow Pages. Actually the yellow pages. I might call a dealership if I got no help from the white pages. I would ask for a BMW number to call. I'm not shy about asking for stuff." **Information about Management** Could not find information. The user went to Google and searched there.
Fidelity (5 times)	**Financials** Could not find financials on the site, and said he would trust an outside source more. "I would go back to my Yahoo page and get the financial info there…. I would also rather get figures from a third party rather than the company itself. A lot of the companies tend to write up these press releases that are uhm… the number will be there, but you'll have to dig." Also could not find financials: "I've been browsing the site for 40 minutes now. I would call them and have them fax more or at least tell me where I can find the info on the website. I'm not very patient." **Press Contact Telephone** Could not find a telephone number. "I'm stuck. I couldn't find the phone number or the earnings." **Wanted Links to Organizations They Donate to** "Unfortunately I cannot go in and see what these organizations are about. There are a lot of religious organizations, healthcare, environmental defense fund. I would definitely have clicked on it if there was a link here." **Information about Management** Could not find the information, and said he would trust and outside source more. "I might try a Lexis-Nexis, I remember reading about a succession question. I would expect it on the company website. I would also use that to counter balance the stuff the company says."
Merck (3 times)	**Other Stories about Managers** Went to Dow Jones Interactive to see if it had other information, find out whether a story had been done recently. **Press Contact** Wanted to call for information because he couldn't find it on the site. **Financials** Got annual report and wanted to move on. "That's a good start. I'd call up some analysts and get some research reports now, start making phone calls."
Nokia (5 times)	**Product Information** Found some information and was ready to call and follow-up. "I think I would be more inclined to call their PR person and flesh this out. It's a decent place to start, but I need more." Got a little information on Nokia, and wanted more. Went to Google. **Financials** Wanted more financial info: "I'd check Standard and Poors, NY Stock Exchange, Lexus Nexis, and call their PR person." Discovered that financials are in Euro dollars. Went to site to convert to U.S. dollars. "It would piss me off that I had to go convert it. I'd think most places would show in both Euro and U.S. dollars." **To See What Analysts Say about Them/Social-Awareness Information** Could not find information. "The information was completely useless to me. I'd have to call. Hopefully, the press person is knowledgeable. Better for her to refer me to someone I can interview and get some anecdotes."
Philip Morris (2 times)	**Financials** Was frustrated when he couldn't download the PDF annual report. "That's annoying. The whole PDF thing. I don't have a reader. I don't know where it's downloading this. If we were doing this, I wouldn't go on." **Press Contact** Couldn't find a phone number. "At this point, it seems they really want a letter, not phone calls. I would use white pages."
SeeItFirst (2	**Financials** Wanted outside sources of information. "Now I would look for something by a business journal

times)	about them, like one of the business trades or something." **News** Saw the news titles with no links to the articles. "If I were really doing this I would copy the title to a search engine and find it."

Tellme (4 times)	**Social Responsibility**
	     Was going to call a PR contact initially.
	     Went to Google when she couldn't find the information on the site.
	 Find Competitors
	     Looked at a few search engines. "Journalists go by the rule of three. If there was Tellme and two more, you could show it was like a movement."
	 Financials
	     Went to Google to find out about reviews and funding.

U.S. Patent Office (8 times)	**Starting Out**
	     "First reaction: useless. The amount of information on the page is overwhelming. I would call them."
	 How to File a Patent and Costs
	     "I would not look on this site, given there is a complete dearth of common sense about it."
	     Looked on the *FAQ* page, where there was a lot of text that was not bolded or easy to scan. "I see nothing here. I'm gone. The questions assume I already have an application submitted. I would try Google again." He searched and ended up back on the site at *Who May Apply for a Patent*.
	     Went to Yahoo and searched for an intellectual property law firm.
	 Budget Information
	     Could not find it on the site. Went to Google, which brought him to a page on the site with the information.
	     Lost any hope for finding anything on the site. "I really like using askjeeves.com for really specific questions." Went to askjeeves.com and typed "What is the budget of the US patent office?"
	 Information About the Director
	     Could not find it on the site. Went to Google, but it did not really help.
	 Contact Information
	     Always goes to yellowpages.com. Didn't really look for it on the site at all.

Wal-Mart (2 times)	**Press Contact**
	     Could not find press telephone number. "What I would do is take that 501 area code then call information then get a main number. Then get the press department."
	 Management Information
	     Could not find information about management. "I would check the <u>Wall Street Journal</u> archives. It would be nice to find bios here."

An important lesson to keep in mind is that even when they used independent search engines, users still blamed the company when they had problems finding information. When users searched elsewhere and could not find the information, they sometimes returned the company site and complained passionately about it. All the frustration they encountered, even on other sites, was directed at the company website.

Users abandon sites when they do not find what they are looking for. If they absolutely need or want the product or service, they call any phone number they find on the site. What's different about journalists is that they always plan to call your company—they want to talk to a person and confirm facts or get a quote. Knowing this, sites should clearly present the press contact name and phone number.

Good Sites: Journalists Gave These Thumbs Up

Some journalists discussed positive experiences with websites they had recently used to research a story. The most memorable positive experiences occurred on sites where journalists easily found interesting facts, and did not encounter major usability issues.

They noted the following sites as particularly useful in doing their research.

AMAZON.COM
www.amazon.com

> *"I research celebrities. Sometimes I might go to a fan site to find some obscure information. Then I know some detail and start with that…. I use Amazon.com to research authors. I was looking for Chris Rice. I typed his name to their search engine. It gives a list of all the titles, a bio, and reader's reviews. I do that pretty often. It gives you the company name and the publisher so I can start down that road to find the person. I think it's pretty honest when you have the readers' opinions."*

AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION
www.ama-assn.org

> *"A good website I visited recently for information, the American Medical Association has a very straightforward website… there are not a lot of photos that take a long time to download. They put all the stuff you need to find on the homepage in great detail. So, instead of having to click to find subsections, it's easy, and all is there for you to see."*

ENGAGE

www.engage.com

> *"I remember getting to something right away that I wanted here. I was looking for information about their online advertising approach. They know their business. They know people will want to know this. Smartly designed site."*

FELD ENTERTAINMENT
www.feldentertainment.com

> *"The circus had a great site. Everything I needed was there. Pictures, contacts, dates."*

FUCKED COMPANY
www.fuckedcompany.com

> *"This was terrific, now with the dotcom fallout. This is very easy. Gives a clean overview, archives, and was easy. The story was an overview of the company."*

OLD TOWN CANOE COMPANY
www.oldtowncanoe.com

> *"They have the history, and a great timeline of canoe-making in the town, and the company made it easy to write a piece on them."*

Old Town Canoe> Timeline

U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS, ROCK ISLAND DISTRICT, WATER MANAGEMENT CENTER

http://water.mvr.usace.army.mil/

> *"The Government sites have a ton of data. Really raw but really good…. The chart about how boats have to wait four hours is really good. Pick a lock and it shows how many boats are waiting now. Could use this raw data right in the story. It's real-time data you don't usually see. That helped."*

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers> Rock Island

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers> Rock Island> Chart

VIACOM
www.viacom.com

> *"This is not attractive, but has corporate announcements here. Easy to find shareholder information and quarterly reports. Tells about their businesses. They have a search engine. Here I immediately know the press person to call for CBS news. Much easier to use."*

About Viacom
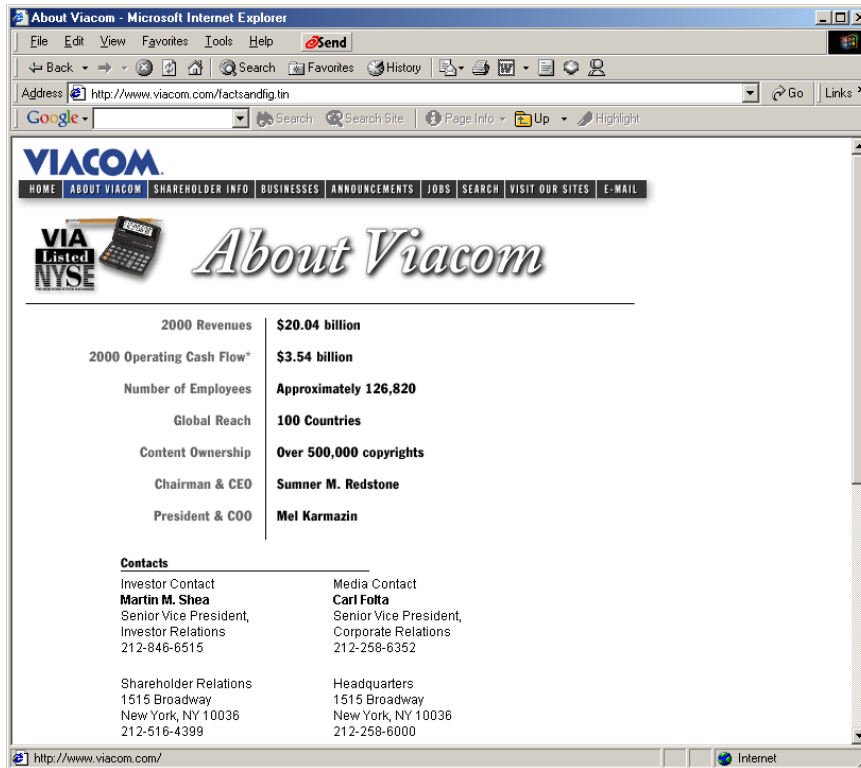
Poor Sites: Journalists Gave These Thumbs Down

Some journalists discussed negative experiences with websites they had recently used to research a story. The most memorable negative experiences occurred on sites where they could not find the most basic product information.

They noted the following sites as particularly unusable in doing their research.

ABC
www.abc.com
Finding information about upcoming movie:

> *"This is tremendously difficult. ABC is doing Judy Garland story, it's not really a show it's a movie. All I see is their shows. Where do they keep their movies? I searched for* Judy Garland. *There's nothing about made-for-TV original movies. They do a lot of them and they don't list them here. This went so far as I called information to get ABC's number and someone connected me to the commissary. The guy said, 'I don't know. I run the commissary. I can't help you.' They don't list this or any movie. You would think they don't even do movies."*

BOGART GOLF
www.bogartgolf.com
Figuring out what the company does was no easy task:

> *"It took a lot of work to find out where they are and general information about the company. Need location for stories. You don't get what the site is right away. Company profile wasn't enough information. It was all there, but it doesn't come across initially. There isn't even a little tagline—what are the company and the products. Had to work to find out there are stores. Hard to tell if the top thing is an ad or what."*

DISNEY
www.disney.com

> *"Disney. We were doing a story. They have so many different divisions. By the time you figure out who to talk to and where, I would do more homework. When you go to their website they offer no contact info."*

HOPE FOR FAMILIES
www.hope4families.com

> *" Look how big this type is. Who needs this? Weird blue and hot pink, as anybody knows who has been in the magazine business, it is harder to focus on dark sites with white text…. No phone number. No*

contact, just a first name. I do like that they have the navigation bar running down the side and lists, that is very helpful."

Hope for Families
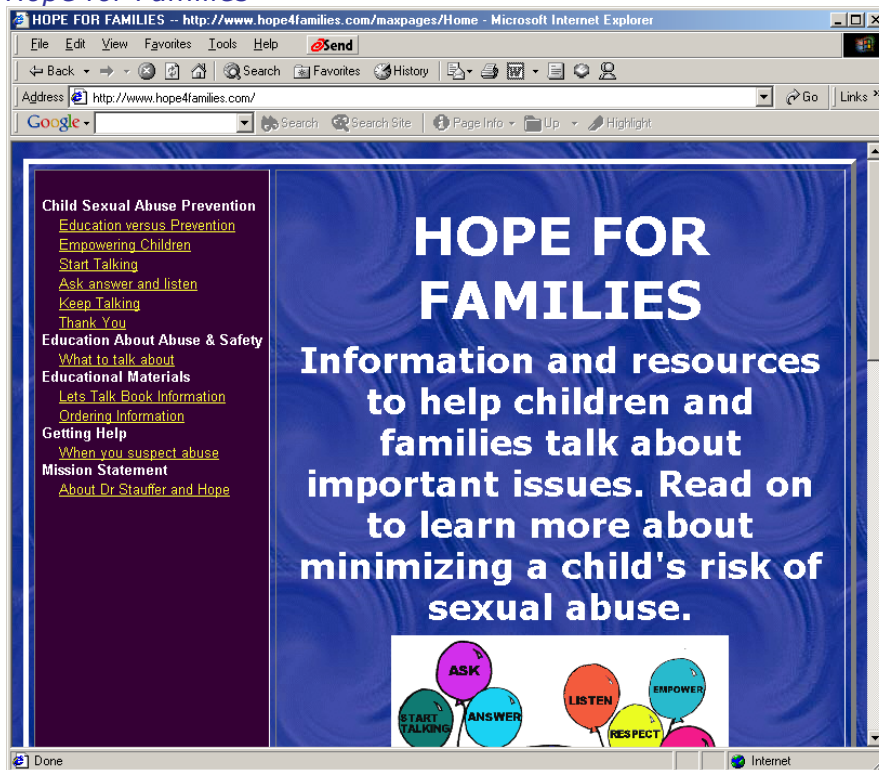
SUBPOP
www.subpop.com

> *"I was going to record label sites. I went to subpop.com and I could not find, for the life of me, what is coming out on their label."*

UPOC
www.upoc.com
Registration kept her from mentioning the company in her article.

> *"I was looking at fuckedcompany.com, about websites falling apart… heard about UPOC text messaging, just like fuckedcompany but get it on your cell phone. I went to UPOC, as soon as I see register I don't want to deal with it. I didn't mention them [in the article] because I didn't want to register. I would have mentioned them if I could have found [product information] easily."*

VH1
www.vh1.com

"I went to VH1. They have some strange something-or-other coming up next week. It was hard to find any information about it. It's debuting in a couple weeks. You'd think they'd play it up. I wanted the date."

About the Sites Studied

We studied 10 websites. Each site has specific PR or press-related pages, though each implements them in different ways. We also examined a few sites that the participating journalists were either currently using or had recently used to research a story.

We selected sites based on company size, industry, and site design. The company size breakdown is: five large companies, two medium companies (about 500 people, $100 million in revenue), two high-tech or start-up companies, and one government agency. Industries represented include automotive, financial services, government, high-tech, pharmaceutical, retail, and tobacco.

Also, we selected some companies based on possible perception issues. For example, government agencies are generally perceived as bureaucratic. Cigarette companies have their own obvious issues. We selected other companies because they generally have good reputations, such as BMW, Fidelity, and Wal-Mart. We selected other companies, such as SeeItFirst and Tellme, because they are technology companies and are not typically well known. Finally, we selected other companies, such as Nokia and BMW, based on their claim to be international.

SITES STUDIED

GENERAL COMPANY INFORMATION	PERCEPTIONS/ REPUTATIONS
BMW www.bmw.com Large Automotive: 35 billion Euro (about $29 billion US)	Good products and services. Sometimes perceived as ostentatious. Some users commented on rumors about possible questionable associations in WW2.
Fidelity Investments www.fidelity.com Medium Financial Services: Headquarters in Boston. Run by the Johnson family.	Security. Money. Magellan fund. Family business.
Merck www.merck.com Large Pharmaceutical: Chemical processing, drug formulation, and packaging operations are carried out in 30 plants in the U.S., Europe, Central and South America, the Far East, and the Pacific Rim. Sales in 1999 were valued at $32.714 billion. Net income in 1999 was valued at $5.891 billion.	Huge. Stock does well. Animal testing. High prices for medicine. Helps cure disease.
Nokia www.nokia.com Large High-Tech: In 1999, net sales totaled EUR 19.8 billion ($19.9 billion US). Headquartered in Finland, Nokia is listed on the New York (NOK), Helsinki, Stockholm, London, Frankfurt and Paris stock exchanges and employs more than 60,000 people.	Cutting-edge phones.
Philip Morris www.philipmorris.com Large Tobacco: Extensive network of manufacturing plants and distribution, does business in markets around the globe. Has 137,000 employees worldwide.	Health issues (lung and throat cancer), plus marketing to children, etc. Affiliation with Kraft.
SeeItFirst	New product.

www.seeitfirst.com High-Tech: Interactive streaming media solutions and services.	High-tech. Video streaming.
Tellme www.tellme.com High-tech	New product. High-tech. Service.
United Colors of Benetton www.benetton.com Medium Retail: Consolidated revenues for the first nine months have increased to 2,800 billion lire (About $12 million US) compared with 2,789 billion in the same period of '99, taking into account the deconsolidation of the activities of Benetton Formula and Socks and Accessories Benetton (SAB) for a total of 110 billion lire.	Controversial advertising and views. Environmentally conscious.
United States Patent Office www.uspto.gov Government	Bureaucratic.
Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. www.walmart.com Large Retail: Today, Wal-Mart Stores, Inc., employs more than 885,000 associates in some 3,000 stores and offices across the U.S. The company has expanded internationally with more than 1,000 stores located beyond U.S. borders. It has also expanded online with walmart.com, which is dedicated to bringing Sam Walton's dream to the Internet.	Family-oriented. Puts "Mom and Pop stores" out of business.

About Participants

Twenty journalists participated the study, 15 in the U.S. and five in Denmark. The journalists work in different media, such as newspapers, magazines, and Web magazines. Five were Danish journalists working on publications based in or very near Copenhagen. The rest were U.S. journalists working on publications based in New York City.

All participants use the Web every day or almost every day. Eleven people, including the five we set up on a PC in Denmark, used a PC for these studies. Nine people used a Macintosh.

BACKGROUND

Journalism experience ranged from 4 to 30 years. Participant age range was 25 to 55 years, with most between the ages of 25 and 35. Gender representation was almost evenly split, with 8 female participants and 12 male participants.

TOPICS THEY WRITE ABOUT

The journalists covered many different topics, including: art and film, beauty, books and booksellers, business, celebrity, computer hardware and software, fashion, high-tech, Internet and e-commerce, music, parenting, photography, politics, publishing, sex, sports, style, and teen issues.

NATURE OF PUBLICATIONS PARTICIPANTS WRITE FOR

Readership of the publications that participants contribute to ranges from less than 14,000 to more than two million. The average readership is about 500,000. Neither the journalists' names nor their affiliations will be disclosed in this report since participants in usability studies are always promised full anonymity. However, following is a general description of the different publications they write for as either staff reporters or freelance journalists:

- Monthly international entertainment magazine with 2 million readers
- Monthly national print magazine with more than 2 million subscribers
- Daily national newspaper with 1.5 million readers
- Bi-weekly international magazine with more than 500,000 subscribers
- Monthly national print and Web magazine with 500,000 subscribers
- Daily national newsmagazine with Web and print editions and more than 500,000 subscribers
- Monthly print magazine with more than 500,000 subscribers
- Daily national newspaper with more than 450,000 readers
- Monthly news magazine with print and Web editions and 300,000 subscribers
- Monthly print magazine with 100,000 subscribers
- Bi-monthly print magazine with 100,000 subscribers
- Weekly print and Web magazine with 40,000 readers

- Weekly Web-based computer magazine with more than 35,000 subscribers
- Monthly national news magazine with print and Web editions and 14,000 subscribers
- Monthly national entertainment magazine with print and Web editions
- Small news website, owned by a large national newspaper
- Small national newspaper owned by a very large national newspaper
- Daily Web magazine
- Various other large and small print and Web-based magazines and newspapers

Methodology

We gave users tasks to perform and the name of the company they were to write about. The facilitator sat next to or just behind the user, listened to and observed what people did, and took notes. At the end of the sessions, users answered a questionnaire, and a discussion followed. The same facilitator conducted all 20 sessions.

USAGE ORDER

Each user in the U.S. tested one of the 10 websites we selected. They also showed or discussed with the facilitator another site that they recently used for a story. Depending on time, they performed tasks on that site as well. They always used the site we selected first, then answered a questionnaire, and then (if there was time) used a site of their choosing. Due to time constraints, the Danish journalists looked only at the pre-selected sites.

SESSION LOCATION

The sessions with the Danish journalists were conducted in a very large office in Copenhagen, Denmark. The journalists came to us and used the PC and high-speed Internet connection we set up there. The sessions in New York City were conducted at the user's office or home office. People used their own computers and Internet connection.

TEST TASKS AND DISCUSSION

We gave users tasks to perform and asked them to think out loud. The general tasks included:

- Your editor gave you an assignment to do a story about [company name]. What would you do first to get some basic information?

- Find out the company's 1999 earnings or income; or

- Find out when they got their last round of funding, how much it was, and where it came from; or

- Find some information about earnings or stock price; or

- Find the annual report for 1999.

- Find out if the company is socially responsible; or

- Find out if and how the company contributes to the community.

We selected other site-specific tasks on the day of the study. These tasks included finding out about such things as a new acquisition, a new factory, information about management, and so on.

After using each site, we gave users a questionnaire about that site. The questionnaire attempted to evaluate:

- User confidence in the answers they found on the site.

- What else they need that they didn't find on the site.

Although most questions asked for numeric ratings, we used theses rating only for discussion and evaluation purposes, not to quantify site quality. In the

questionnaire, users rated several statements and answered a few questions. For example:

- The information on the website is appropriate.

- The information on the website is of high quality.

- Finding the information I wanted was easy.

- The information on the website is credible.

- I trust the information on the website.

- Based on the website, I could recommend the products or services to my readers or viewers.

- What information, if any, would you want added to the website? Or, what information is missing from the website that you feel should be there?

- Would you look on the website for a contact name and phone number in the PR department? Why or why not?

After users completed the questionnaire, the facilitator asked for clarification about specific points the user raised during the study.

About Using This Methodology

Generally, our method worked well for this type of study, and we recommend it. Ideas for future studies like these are to either make the actual test sessions an hour longer, or conduct a few site visits in addition to the shorter sessions.

Although the short sessions and travel around New York City created a relatively high overhead, it enabled more busy journalists to participate. The mix of home office sessions with freelancers and sessions with people in the thick of the publishing business makes the data interesting. Also, the international feedback is priceless, both from those journalists outside the U.S. and from U.S. journalists evaluating sites from companies in other countries.

POSITIVES

Because the test facilitator traveled to users in local offices in New York City, there was no need to find, set up, clean up, and pay for a rented lab or office space.

Going to the users seemed to make it easier for them to answer questions about current projects. For example, they often had recently visited websites, which were bookmarked or in their history list, making it easier to remember the sites they liked and disliked. Users also had immediate access to files and documents they were using.

It's probable that going to users made it possible for more journalists to participate. Rather than set aside travel time and make arrangements, they simply had to be in their office and block-off the time, as if they were having a regular meeting.

As with site visits, going to users lets you see them in their real environment (this is also noted in the Negatives section below).

Finally, with this type of study, cell phones are a must. Mine saved me several times when directions were inaccurate, or I got stuck in traffic and was running late.

NEGATIVES

To get journalists to participate, we had to keep the session time down to 60 or 90 minutes. Fitting in everything we wanted was thus impossible, and we were forced to cut some of the tasks in the original plan.

The facilitator's travel created a lot of overhead. I spent a lot of time traveling around New York City—sometimes going from SoHo to Brooklyn and then uptown in a single day. The short intervals between sessions left little time to summarize observations while they were fresh.

There were some last-minute cancellations. Although all users had confirmed the sessions, extenuating circumstances can arise. If I had been in an office with them coming to me, I could have worked while I waited. As it was, I wasted at least five hours.

Similar to field studies, with this methodology you should prepare to adapt to the user's environment. People are very gracious, inviting you to their office or home. Sometimes you may find yourself perched on a stool, looking over the user's

shoulder at a very small laptop screen with the sun glaring on it, all while the user's cat rubs up against your leg. Scenarios of this sort were not uncommon.

Also similar to site visits, this methodology lets you see people work in their real environment. Although this has its high points (see Positives section above), it also has its lows. Watching users do tasks on old computers using a dial-up connection gave a real sense of just how frustrating some websites are for users to deal with. While all of this is extremely interesting in many ways, it is less fascinating when your goal is to study specific websites and you have specific tasks for users to accomplish in a very short time.

When studies happened in people's offices, there was always at least one interruption. Usually, it was a co-worker coming in to ask a question; sometimes it was a phone call that the user had to take. This did not seem to impact the study at all, beyond requiring a little extra time.

Half of the participants we recruited through referrals from business associates, family, and friends. The rest we scheduled through a recruiting agency. We asked the agency for professional journalists whom we could visit on site, using their own computer and Internet connection. The recruiting agency deemed this a difficult profile, and quoted a higher price ($140 per user) than the usual ($100 to $120 per user.)

POINTS OF INTEREST
We timed the tasks without letting users know about it. However, we did not use the timings in the analysis, since users could do what they wanted during a task. For example, if users were looking for an annual report but also wanted to look at the product page, we let them. Also, tasks tended to overlap quite a bit. Our method worked very well for analyzing behavior and collecting qualitative data. However, we didn't feel it was fair to use the task timings as success measurements in the analysis.

As with field studies, you must consider personal safety when running studies of this sort. You should take care when going to home offices or secluded office buildings by yourself. For participants recruited by the agency, I specifically requested we test in offices, rather than home offices. When they referred people with home offices, we cleared them on a case-by-case basis. With more typical site visits safety is somewhat less of a concern, since you can frequently recruit participants through product managers or sales people who know them. Also, there is usually more than one person going on the visit.

As for the testing itself, when users did not know much about a company, they gave very interesting feedback. In essence, the test was their first exposure and they used the site to learn about the company and what it does. When users did have preconceived notions about a company, the interest was in seeing how these ideas were confirmed or changed by their site visit.

INTERNATIONAL-SPECIFIC NOTES (DENMARK)
For international studies, keep the tasks and number of tasks short. Most of the Danish journalists took the entire 90 minutes testing a single site. Also keep the questionnaires short and simple. Only ask for information you are not getting during the session.

The Danish journalists were very resistant to reading out loud. Perhaps they simply didn't want to or perhaps I didn't explain "read out loud" clearly enough. It could be that they were self-conscious about reading English out loud. While they did not always read aloud during specified tasks, the participants were very talkative during the session. Ideally, a person who knows the language should run these tests, with the tasks, sites, and comments all in Danish.

In the middle of one test, a user left the English version of the site and went to the Danish version of the site. After he looked at it for a few minutes, I had to ask him to return to the English version so I would know what he was doing. He obviously would have preferred the Danish version at that point. Again, a facilitator who speaks Danish would be preferable to one who does not.

An English word in the questionnaire, *credible*, confused two people. I told them it meant: believable, trustworthy, that you believe it to be true. I jotted down what I said so I could at least give the same response to any future participants who asked the question. If possible, pilot test materials to avoid these situations.

Three users read a number written in words on the site, for example *$36 million*, and asked me to write it out on paper in numbers in millions. They needed to see the zeros (36,000,000) to know for sure what the number was. Again, attempt to predetermine your responses for questions when there are potential language or cultural issues with a website. I also recommend that you tell users you're interested in all of their questions, and you will answer what you can at the end of the study.

My schedule in Denmark was very full. I ran five two-hour tests on a single Sunday after traveling in Europe for two weeks. By the last session, I wished that I had a video camera to help ensure I wasn't missing anything. I recommend bringing a video camera if you have scheduled a long day of testing.

THE FIVE OFFICE TESTS (DENMARK)
We had full attendance in Copenhagen and all five people arrived for their sessions on time. This might be because our participants were all recruited by a friend (also a Danish journalist) who had a professional relationship with each participant. All five people seemed very interested in giving feedback, and a few were also interested in running usability studies, since they write for websites.

While testing in the office, we heard a few phone calls in the background. It didn't disturb the testing.

The test was run in a large, four-person office. There was one person, not participating in the study, who was working quietly in the testing office the whole time. A second journalist came later. She was a tester and came early for her session while I was still interviewing the other participant. Luckily, she left the office for a few minutes and thus did not hear the post-test interview.

One user was a journalist and also the Webmaster for the journalist who was working quietly in the testing room. At one point, when this user was testing a site, he paused to think of an answer and the other journalist seemed to think we were

taking a break and asked him a question. The user excused himself and went over to fix (or at least look at) a broken link on their site.

During the Copenhagen testing, only one site went down and was unavailable when I wanted to test it. This occurred toward the beginning of the study, so it was no problem. We simply tested another site. If this had happened in the last session, it would have been an issue.

About the Authors

Kara Pernice Coyne is a Senior User Experience Specialist at Nielsen Norman Group. Previously, she established successful usability programs at Lotus Development; Iris Associates, an IBM subsidiary; and Interleaf. She managed the first usability program for the Lotus Notes, Domino Server, and Designer products. And, after her team worked on R5, *PC Magazine* wrote, "If this were summer camp, Lotus Notes would walk away with the Most Improved Camper award." Coyne has 10 years of experience in evaluating software usability in the areas of collaboration, document management, and database design. She has been involved in planning and designing state-of-the-art usability labs, and has conducted hundreds of lab studies, and many remote studies, surveys, and field studies. She has also been a user interaction designer for a variety of products ranging from Web calendar applications to server monitoring programs. She was selected to chair the Usability Professionals' Association conferences in 2000 and 2001, and was presentations chair for UPA 1999. Coyne has an MBA from Northeastern University and a BA from Simmons College, where she studied both journalism and public relations.

Dr. Jakob Nielsen (www.useit.com) is a User Advocate specializing in Web usability and a principal of Nielsen Norman Group, which he co-founded with Dr. Donald A. Norman, former Vice President of Apple Research. Until 1998, Dr. Nielsen was a Sun Microsystems Distinguished Engineer and led that company's Web usability efforts starting with the original design of SunWeb in early 1994. His previous affiliations include the IBM User Interface Institute, Bell Communications Research, and the Technical University of Denmark. Nielsen's most recent book, *Designing Web Usability: The Practice of Simplicity* has about a quarter million copies in print in 13 languages. In its review, *Business Week* said that this book "should [...] be read by any executive with responsibility for managing online operations." Nielsen's Alertbox column about Web usability has been published on the Internet since 1995 (www.useit.com/alertbox) and currently has about 200,000 readers. Nielsen has been called "the guru of Web page usability" (*The New York Times*), "the smartest person on the Web" (*ZDNet*), "knows more about what makes websites work than anyone else on the planet" (*Chicago Tribune*), and "the next best thing to a true time machine" (*USA Today*). He holds 55 U.S. patents, mainly on ways to make the Internet easier to use.

Acknowledgements

A special thank you to the journalists who participated in this study. (Participants are promised full anonymity, so we do not name people or their publications here.)

Also, thank you to the following people for their contribution to this report:

Reports by Nielsen Norman Group

For a full list and to download reports, please see http://www.NNgroup.com/reports

WEB USABILITY GUIDELINES
- Site map usability: 28 design guidelines
- PR sections of corporate sites: optimizing usability for journalists: 32 design guidelines
- E-commerce user experience: 207 design guidelines.
  Series of reports covering:
    - Product pages
    - Category pages
    - Shopping carts, checkout, and registration
    - Search
    - Selling strategies
    - Trust and credibility
    - International users
- Locator usability: 21 design guidelines to help customers find stores, offices, and other company locations ("clicks & bricks")

INTRANET USABILITY
- Intranet design annual 2001
- Intranet design annual 2002 (to be published September 2002)

USER SEGMENTS
- Beyond ALT Text: improving usability for users with disabilities (75 design guidelines)
- Designing Websites for Senior Citizens: 46 design guidelines based on usability studies with people age 65 and over
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USER-CENTERED DESIGN METHODOLOGY
- 230 tips to improve the way you run user tests
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TECHNOLOGY ANALYSIS AND STRATEGY
- WAP usability report: field study finding